Illusory Ends in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Erec et Enide*

1. Introduction: ‘une mout bele conjointure’

There have been countless attempts to theorise the compositional technique Chrétien de Troyes mentions in the prologue to his first Arthurian romance, *Erec et Enide*: ‘une mout bele conjointure’ (l. 19). This formulation is readily identified with the poet’s compositional technique, but the term *bele conjointure* perhaps more accurately defines the ideal result of this distinctively medieval poetic practice; that is, 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 W. A. Nitze to Douglas Kelly and Eugène Vinaver. But whatever its exact significations, most agree that it describes 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.1 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 locus of meaning, might unthinkingly expect to find this *nucleus* in the concluding portion of the romance.

Yet even those 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, complete and meaningful.2 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 do contain a *nucleus* of poetic truth or not. As the first of Chrétien’s romances, and the origin of *bele conjointure*, *Erec et Enide* is a crucial source 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 satisfactory 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 ‘mainte diverse contree’ of the Arthurian world (ll. 85, 297, 6644), crowned in a great crescendo of harmony, optimism and beauty:

Li ceptres fu au roi bailliez, *ad*

Qui a mervoilles l’esgarda;

Si le mist, que plus ne tarda,

Li roi Erec an sa main destre; *ad*

Or fu il rois si con dut ester. *ad*

Puis ra Enide coronee (ll. 6882-87).3

[The sceptre was handed to the King,/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.]

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.4 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. 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 as ‘li premerains vers’ (l. 1844).5 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.6

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*, even when, as Roberta L. Krueger notes, ‘all the requirements for a harmonious conclusion seem to have been fulfilled’.7 This phrase ‘illusory end’ is my own, used here to denote a temporary and spurious point of resolution, a point at which the narrative could 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.8 This analysis hopes to elucidate the mechanics of the structural and thematic ends of *Erec et Enide* and will suggest how these ends, and the ways in which the romance is finished, relates to the *bele conjointure* the poet promises to create in his prologue.

2. The Prologue

Perhaps the most famous of Chrétien’s 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 feckless *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)’.9

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 *conjunctura*, which should be made, as Isidore says, with a certain perfection or attractiveness. When the *conjunctura* has been made ‘cum decore aliquo’, an attractive *pictura* results. The *conjunctura* is thus the construction of the *cortex* of the poem, and it was conventionally made so that a *nucleus* of truth lay beneath it.10

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.11 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 CRESTIIENS 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*

[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, *Crestiiens* inserts himself into rhyme position and encourages everyone to direct their thought and effort towards ‘bien dire’ and ‘bien aprandre’, 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 the rhyme of an accented final vowel and any succeeding consonants.12 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.13

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, that presumed locus of meaning, is constructed in the way that it is, or indeed why there appear to be several possible ‘ends’. 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 the reader does not know what to expect from ‘the end’ from the point of view 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*’.14 Allusions and implications are far from satisfactory, however: a closer analysis of *Erec et Enide* is therefore required to gain a better understanding of Chrétien’s sense of ending.

3. The Coronation Episode

The structural 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 a kind of 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 *tapisserie* of the narrative motifs: monarchy and chivalry, heaven and earth, beauty and prowess, love and marriage, old order interwoven with new. This static picture of the court is reminiscient 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’ [If one tries to make a cut, it all falls to pieces]. 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’.15 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 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* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music), 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.16

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).17 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 convivality of the banquet hall, wherethe Arthurian community may at long last celebrate itself in the newly-crowned symbol of its reintegration.18

This lavish inaugural celebration, which sees *conjointure* become both theme and form,19 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 words that form the couplet: ‘Et por Erec qu’il ama tant./Li contes fine ci a tant’ [And because of Erec whom he loved so much./The tale ends at this point] (ll. 6957-58).20

So, what is it exactly about this ‘segment’, as per Maddox calls it, that signals completion?21 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 marks the close of the narrative paratextually (‘Explycyt li romans d’Erec et d’Enide’).22 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 which make up the coronation scene, and thus constitutes a kind of poetic coda to the romance. It is also characterised by a higher concentration of the ‘terminal features’ that Barbara Herrnstein Smith identifiesin relation to twentieth-century verse: repetition, alliterations, as well as the similarly emphatic medieval rhetoric-poetic figures *rime équivoque* and *adnominatio*, all of which can be seen, following Leah Tether, as adding impact to the final lines of the medieval poem.23 The description of Erec’s *quadrivium* robe is a principal example of this:

Ceste oevre fu el drap portreite,

De quoi la robe Erec fu feite, *al*

A fil d’or ovree et tissue.

La pane qui i fu cosue

Fu d’unes contrefeites bestes,

Qui ont totes blanches les testes

Et les cos noirs com une more,

Les dos ont toz vermauz dessore, *fa*

Les vantres vers, et la coe inde. *al, re*

Iteus bestes neissent an Inde, *re*

Si ont barbioletes non; *re*

Ne manjuent s’especes non, *re*

Que vos diroie del mantel? *al*

Mout fu riches et buens et biaus: *en*

Quatre pierres ot es tassiaus,

D’une part ot deus crisolites, *r*

Et de l’autre deus ametistes, *r*

Qui furent assises an or (ll. 6792-6809). *al*

[This work was portrayed on the stuff,/of which Erec’s robe was made,/all worked

and woven with thread of gold./The fur lining what was sewed within/Belonged to

some strange beasts,/whose heads are all white/and whose necks are as black as

mulberries,/the beasts have vermillion 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 (*ra*) and enumeration (*en*).24

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 Herrnstein 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 do not in themselves create a satisfactory end in the medieval romance.25 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.26 This recapitulation conforms 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 eligateur quod erit gravissimum, et unum quidque, quam brevissime transeatur, ut memoria, non oratio renovate videatur.27

[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.]

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 true completion.

4. *Li Premerains Vers*

Leah Tether identifies a third component in the proper notice of closure, that is, the ‘bilateral symmetry between the end and the beginning’.28 Tether names multiple theorists, medieval and modern, who have 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).29 Far more recently, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode expounds the biblical model of cyclicity that, he argues, has shaped all subsequent fictions ‘whose ends are consonant with [their] origins’.30 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 concatenation of poetic devices. But, interestingly, 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*. 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’.31 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 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*.32 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 organized by interlace and analogy.

To clarify, the structural device of interlace (*entrelacement*) derives from Ferdinand 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.33 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. In his seminal work on *The Rise of Romance*, Eugène Vinaver indicates that the ‘juxtaposition of analogous incidents’ was the more dominant of these two form-conferring principles in the romance genre.34 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 throughout the romance, 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 definitive end. Formally, too, there is symmetry between the lavish description of ‘li mantiaus’ and other regalia that Enide wears for her ‘coronation’ (l. 1608), and the later description of Erec’s coronation garb (ll. 6701-6809), as well as between the naming of Enide shortly after the end of this section (l. 2031), and Erec’s proper naming as ‘Li roi Erec’ in the coronation scene (l. 6874). There is also a clear parallel between the listing 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). In both episodes this enumeration creates a dominant impression of ‘assanble’, reconciliation and celebration.

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 *rois respond*: ‘N’est pas manconge; *al*

Cesti, s’an ne la me chalonge,

Donrai je del blanc cerf l’enor.’

Puis dist as chevaliers: ‘Seignor,

Qu’an dites vos? Que vos est vis? *ad*, *re*

Ceste est et de cors et de vis *re*

Et de quan qu’estuet a pucele

La plus jantis et la plus bele *r*

Qui soit jusque la, ce me sanble, *re*

Ou li ciaus et la terre assanble (ll. 1777-86). *re*

[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*), *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*; these individual poetic devices are not 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, suggest that at this point Erec’s attributes are merely an ‘outward veneer’. He only appears to have used his prowess for the common good, for the bride/bird-winning game is but a simulation of chivalry that fortuitously leads to the settlement of the debate over ‘la plus bele’.35 Appropriately, then, it is only Enide, as a symbol of beauty, and not Erec, the figure of *chevalerie*, 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 stage on the way to final gratification. Thus, formally, thematically and symbolically the tale cannot end here. However, while the ritual of the ‘beisier’ is no more than an ‘illusory end’ (and marks the termination of the first stage of the narrative), it would 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.36

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’s (and Enide’s) last and greatest *aventure*, 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.37 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 batant;

Que li uns l’autre n’i atant.

Et cil qui el vergier estoient

D’Erec disarmer s’aprestoient

Et chantoient *par contançon ad*

Tuit de la joie une chançon; *ad*

Et les dames un lai troverent,

Que ‘le lai de joie’ apelerent;

Mes n’est gueires li lais seüz (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.]

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. 6235-6355). 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 subjectivity 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.

Despite all this, the ‘end’ here is clearly not a satisfactory one. Like Mabonagrains and his *amie* 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, there are so few of the literary devices earlier defined as terminal features – there is but one instance of *adnominatio* (*ad*) – that they can hardly be identified as such. There are some rhyming flourishes elsewhere in this 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 a satisfactory 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 therefore 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’.38 There is a ‘the 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.39 However, the concept of illusory ends offers a more flexible view of the structure of *Erec et 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.

6. Minor Illusory Ends

There are, however, further, more minor illusory endings that are analogous 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 prefigurations 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. He strikes Enide for resisting her new circumstances, but she refuses to acquiesce:

‘Assez me bat, assez me fier! *r*, *re*

Ja tant ne te troverai fier *al*, *re*

Que port oi face plus ne mains, *re*

Se tu or androit a tes mains *re*

Me devoies les iauz sachier

Ou trestote vive escorchier.’

Antre cez dizetcez tançons *al*

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 in mind and body, 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 a seeming 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 soiiez de rien esmaiiee,/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.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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 episode is concluded with an image of Erec waking from a *fausse morte*. As Vinaver indicates, coherence is achieved through the conjunction of analogous events, which simultaneously ‘bring[s] to light something which would otherwise have remained unknown or explained’.41 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.

Together the minor illusory ‘ends’ of the Guivret encounter and the escape from the Count 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. On a metaphorical level, 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.42 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’.43 But this repetition of theme and image also creates a structural unity not unlike the effect of literary *mise en abyme*, whereby a smaller copy of a scene or narrative emerges out of a larger one and so forth.

This chapter has identified four illusory 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.44 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*.45

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 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’.46 For the most part, their relationship seems deserving of the scholarly attention it has received. 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 (see Appendix 1).[[2]](#footnote-2) 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.47 The episode with which this illumination is associated in the romance itself contains a rhyming flourish not unlike the terminal features described earlier (ll. 2813-60). This seems 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.48

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’.49 Chrétien’s prologue shows that he was deeply invested in if not devoted to perfecting his poetic practice, and for this reason it seems possible that the growing and proper enthralment 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 a *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 Erec and Enide are allegorical apotheoses of chivalric *matière* and beautiful poetic form respectively.50 As symbolic figures, 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, 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, which means that closure is built incrementally over the course of the romance.

The title of the romance is perfectly appropriate: 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 his first Arthurian romance in title as ‘Erec et Enide’, and not to the singular ‘Erec’. It is therefore a truly fitting end that in the coronation scene, Karl D. Uitti indicates, ‘[Erec] reveals himself fit to put on the now vernacularized Arts of *clergie*: 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’.52 With Enide in her rightful place at his side, and clothed in a gown adorned with the figures of the *quadrivium*, learning and knighthood are shown to perfectly complement one another, and Erec finally comes to incarnate a beautiful form of vernacularised chivalry. The romance finally ends, and can only end, when Erec and Enide are properly joined in royal matrimony and in poetry; when the ideals of *chevalerie*, *amors* and *clergie* are brought into a decisive and harmonious balance with one another.

1. *Erec und Enide*, ed. W. Foerster (Amsterdam, 1965), p. 298; W. A. Nitze, ‘The Romance of Erec, Son of Lac’, *Modern Philology* 11.4 (1914), 445-89 (p. 488); F. D. Kelly, ‘The Source and Meaning of Conjointure in Chrétien’s Erec 14’, *Viator* 1 (1971), 179-200 (p. 200); E. Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, (Oxford, 1971), p. 36; D. W. Robertson, Jr., ‘Some Medieval Literary Terminology, With Special Reference of Chrétien de Troyes’, *Studies in Philology* 48 (1951), 669-692 (p. 684).

2. *Poetria nova*, trans. M. F. Nims (Toronto, 1967), p. 19; ‘Ars versificatoria’, in *Les Arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle: Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge*, ed. E. Faral (Paris, 1924), pp. 191-93.

3. *Erec und Enide*, ed. Foerster, p. 250, all translations are my own.

4. *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, ed. T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton, 1994), p. 243.

5. N. J. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay on Narrative Art, Davis Medieval Texts and Studies*, 3 vols. (Leiden, 1980), p. 72.

6. ‘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, it 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’: R. P. McGerr,‘Medieval Concepts of Literary Closure: Theory and Practice’, *Exemplaria* 1 (1989), 149-79 (p. 150).

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

8. Krueger, ‘Chrétien de Troyes’, p. 163.

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

10. Robertson, Jr., ‘Some Medieval Literary Terminology’, p. 684.

11. 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. E. C. Wickham and H. W. Garrod (Oxford, 1959), p. 242; J. Frappier, ‘Chrétien de Troyes: l’homme et l’œuvre’, in *Connaissance des lettres* 50 (Paris, 1957), p. 62.

12. *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. R. Green and S. Cushman, 4th edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1190.

13. L. Clymer, ‘The Poet as Teacher’, in *The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1600-1800*, ed. J. Lynch (Oxford, 2016), p. 185.

14. L, Tether, *The Continuations of Chrétien’s ‘Perceval’: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 77.

15. F. Lot, *Étude sur le Lancelot en prose* (Paris, 1918), p. 28; Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, p. 72.

16. *Clergie* translates as ‘clerical learning’; medieval poets such as Chrétien were expected to have mastered the arts of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music); G. Paris, ‘review of Foerster (item 2)’, *Romania* 20 (1891), 148-66 (p. 154); G. S. Burgess, *Chrétien de Troyes: Erec et Enide*, Critical Guides to French Texts (London, 1984), p. 81.

17. The preposition ‘a’ in this line ‘Erec a Enide’ is the same in every edition and is translated as ‘with’: *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W. Kibler (London, 2004), p. 121.

18. D. Maddox, *Structure and Sacring: The Systematic Kingdom in Chrétien’s Erec et Enide* (Lexington, Ky, 1978), p. 172.

19. When *conjointure* is taken to mean both literary composition and the ‘joining together’ of things or people.

20. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Green and Cushman, p. 575.

21. Maddox, *Structure and Sacring,* p. 41.

22. *Erec und Enide*, ed. Foerster p. 252.

23. B. H. Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago, 1968), p. 151; Tether, *The Continuations of Chrétien's ‘Perceval’*,p. 80.

24. 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. The use of *rime équivoque* in four consecutive lines is a particularly striking as a terminal feature.

25. Smith, *Poetic Closure*, p. 152.

26. Krueger, ‘Chrétien de Troyes’, p. 164; Maddox, *Structure and Sacring*, p. 172.

27. *De inventione*, ed. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, 1949), pp. 150-51.

28. Tether, *The Continuations of Chrétien's ‘Perceval’*, pp. 68-71.

29. 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. M. F. Nims, p. 17.

30. F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, 1967), p. 5.

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

32. Reduced to its essential elements, the bride-winning pattern characteristically divides into two phases. In the initial phase, a stable situation at court is interrupted by a crisis that sends the hero out on a journey culminating in bride-winning and the hero's return to court. In a second phase, the pattern is repeated so that the hero must undergo a second crisis and journey to regain his bride and his status prior to an ultimate return to court: Maddox, *Structure and Sacring*, p. 45.

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

34. Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, p. 105.

35. L. Amtower, ‘Courtly Code and Conjointure: The Rhetoric of Identity in Erec et Enide,’ *Neophilologus* 77.2 (1993), 179–89 (p. 181).

36. Maddox, *Structure and Sacring*, pp. 73-80.

37. S. Davis, ed., ‘Geraint son of Erbin’, in *The Mabinogion* (Oxford, 2007), p. 177.

38. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien*, p. 75

39. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien*, pp. 72-81; Z. P. Zaddy, ‘The Structure of Chretien’s Erec’, *Modern Language Review* 62 (1967) 608–19.

40. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien*, p. 72.

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

42. This is merely one set of examples of analogic connections that run through *Erec et Enide* – for further examples see Maddox and Lacy.

43. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien*, p. 80.

44. T. E. Hart, ‘The *Quadrivium* and Chrétien’s Theory of Composition: Some Conjunctures and Conjectures’, *Thomas Elwood Symposium* 35.1 (1981) 57-86.

45. ‘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, *Structure and Sacring*, p. 15.

46. S. Hindman, *Sealed in Parchment: Rereadings of Knighthood in the Illuminated Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes* (Chicago, 1994), p. 129.

47. See Figure 1. Erec defends Enide from three robbers, *Erec et Enide*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 24403, fol. 140v; the first of these miniatures depicts the hunt for the white stag, and the last picture shows Erec battling the giants: Hindman, *Sealed in Parchment*, pp. 134-36.

48. Hindman, *Sealed in Parchment*, pp. 18-35.

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

50. 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*, ed. Green and Cushman, p. 507.

51. K. D. Uitti, ‘Vernacularisation 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. R. T. Pickens (Lexington, 1983), pp. 100-01.

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1. Lacy, Craft of Chrétien, III.78 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Erec defends Enide from the robbers, *Erec et Enide*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 24403, fol. 140v [↑](#footnote-ref-2)