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Parallel fitt-endings in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A case of medieval paratextuality

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the endings of the so-called fitts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For the first time in the criticism of this renowned fourteenth-century alliterative romance of the Matter of Britain attention is called to a remarkable number of lexical and thematic features shared by the concluding sections of the poem's four compositional divisions. It is argued that the parallel fitt-endings serve to underline the units of *Gawain* as an orally delivered Arthurian narrative of the kind that was used as a form of entertainment at medieval round tables and generally at court. The rationale behind the parallel fitt-endings is discussed in terms of paratextuality, with emphasis on such typical paratextual effects as pointing to the genre and the mode of the text in question. Paratexts peculiar to medieval literature and to Middle English alliterative romance are pointed out.

Keywords: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, alliterative romance, courtly entertainment, fitt, closure, parallelism, paratext.

1. Introductory remarks

The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is customarily divided into four compositional units, the so-called fitts. The term *fitt*, alternatively spelled *fit* and apparently related to the *fittea* which occurs in the Latin preface of the alliterative Old Saxon *Heliand* (c. 830), signifies a division of a long narrative poem; like *canto*, *fitt* presumably indicated a portion of a poem that could be sung or chanted by a minstrel at one sitting. Unlike cantos, though, fitts seem to belong distinctively to the tradition of alliterative versifying, where the label *fitt* is used along with what appears to be its close synonym, *passus*, and

where such units have been shown to have two separate functions: “they can allude to a device of performance [...] as typically practised by minstrels and typical ballad-singers” or “they can represent the conventional divisions of long texts in alliterative measures” (Hardman 1992: 67).

The division of *Gawain* into fitts was proposed in the first modern edition of the romance by Sir Frederic Madden which appeared in 1839 and has been almost universally accepted ever since, although, as Phillipa Hardman points out, none of the four fitts is “so named or numbered in the manuscript” (1967: 63). The division is based chiefly upon the manuscript’s four large decorated initials – letters of blue, flourished with red. In the “Introduction” to Tolkien’s edition of *Gawain* it is stated that “Madden was right in accepting them as structural divisions of the poem having the authority of the author” (xii).¹ This paper supports the division of *Gawain* into four narrative units on different grounds – by observing considerable similarity of the fitt-endings. Just as the beginning of each fitt is marked by the manuscript’s visual feature, a large decorated initial, so are the fitt-endings marked at a deeper, narrative level by verbal and thematic correspondence rather than sheer graphic layout. The fitt-concluding passages taken here into consideration extend each over a considerable number of lines: thirty (Fitt I), twenty (Fitt II), forty-five (Fitt III), and forty-one (Fitt IV). In the last case, ending the fitt merges with closure of the whole romance. Thematic parallels between the fitt-endings are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the fitt-endings in *Gawain*

Fitt I 460-90	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – New Year Day’s feasting at Camelot; mirth and laughter; courteous speech – entire court present – principal actors: Arthur, Gawain, Guinevere – dialogised response to the adventure enacted in the Fitt – end of day and entertainment: bedtime – focus on Gawain alone with his thoughts
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¹ Among the few critics who questioned the fourfold division, on account of the occurrence of five more ornamented initials in the *Gawain* portion of the manuscript, was Laurita L. Hill.

<p>Fitt II 1105-25</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - revelry at Hautdesert; drinking to seal the exchange of winnings contract - Gawain and the lord of the castle as main actors - whole court present: lords and ladies; serving-men as extras - courtiers' commentary in their private conversations - repeating the covenants - end of day and bedtime
<p>Fitt III 1952-97</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New Year Eve's feasting, merrymaking, and jesting at Hautdesert - whole household present, including servants - main actors: Gawain, the lord, and the two ladies of the castle - Gawain's courteous leave-taking of everyone, including the servants - end of day and bedtime - focus on Gawain asleep, possibly disturbed by his thoughts
<p>Fitt IV 2489-2530</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enthusiastic reception of Gawain upon his return to Camelot - Arthur's court present - principal actors: Gawain, the king, and the queen - Gawain's recapitulation of his adventure - the court's laughter and re-interpretation of Gawain's story - turn to book reading and writing - conclusion of the romance; final prayer

The clearly noticeable thematic correspondence calls attention to these passages as signals of concluding a major part of the poem in accordance with alliterative and tail-rhyme romance tradition. Chaucer in his parody of popular romance in *Sir Thopas* makes explicit textual reference to fitts, which suggests that such was, on average, the actual practice. Although the *Gawain*-poet shuns this straightforward method, I would argue that he does indicate finalization by means of more sophisticated signals implicit within the story.

Both Chaucer in *Sir Thopas* and the *Gawain*-poet follow a general practice noticeable in medieval manuscripts, where indications of a fitt or passus do not mark the beginning of a new part but the part which has just been completed. In brief, they are not headings, or chapter titles, "marking the beginning of a new passus", but "a sign of completion marking the end of the finished passus" (Hardman 1992: 68). The *Gawain*-poet's fitt-ending narrative pattern mirrors the way minstrels marked off convenient breaks in oral transmission, though in his case the indication is not imposed by a

performer but is authorial, with the author merely adopting the minstrel's stance. Another practice observable in medieval alliterative romances is that some of them mark the completion of the first fitt or passus only, but not the other parts. In *William of Palerne*, for instance, the author makes "an elaborate break at the end of the first passus, and nowhere else" (Hardman 1992: 70). The explanation offered by Hardman is that the first fitt functioned as a sample, or a way of advertising the whole work, on the basis of which the public decided whether they would have the rest of it. In *Gawain*, the first fitt is the most self-contained one while being also open-ended: it can stand alone or it can be continued, depending on the audience's choice, but its suspenseful ending compels the audience to carry on, all of which makes this fitt a masterful introduction of the whole work in terms of salesmanship. Notably, it is the only one of the poem's four fitts that is not further subdivided by decorated initials, and the decorated initial marking its completion at line 491 differs in size from all the other ones, extending over four lines rather than three or six. Fitts, particularly the first one, are a pre-modern version of instalments into which Victorian writers would divide their novels.

2. Analysis and discussion

An important narrative signal of the completion of a fitt in *Gawain* is that in each case the end of story coincides with the end of day and its entertainment. In the first fitt, it is stated: "Wyth wele walt þey þat day, til worþed an ende / in londe" (485-86; they spent that day with delight till the end came to pass on earth).² The sense of an ending is here emphasized by the fact that the key words, *ende* and *day*, are placed at the close of, respectively, the line and its first half-line, in the last line of the alliterative stock of the stanza running on to the bob in which another key word is placed, *londe*. The implied sense is that this is like the end of the world for Gawain anticipating the Green Knight's return blow. The wheel focuses on Gawain alone with his thoughts, presumably in his bedchamber. In the second fitt, the light-hearted revelry of the courtiers continues until it is time to kiss good-byes, take leave, and go to bed. The growing quiet is conveyed as the courtiers speak softly, "stilly" (1117), and are led away "ful softe" (1121 – a bob line) to their bedchambers by many brisk serving-men with gleaming torches. The phrase "to bed"

² All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are after the Tolkien edition and are followed by line numbers.

(1120) is reiterated as “to his bed” (1122) and *bed* is a link-word between the stock and the wheel of the stanza. The sense of end of day is conveyed too by the line-final phrase “at þe laste” (1120) concluding the stock. In the third fitt, exuberant feasting continues till late at night – “Burnez to hor bedde behoued at þe laste” (1959; it was time for folk to go to bed) – and Gawain has to take leave of the lord, the two ladies, and the whole court. Eventually, Gawain is led away by serving-men with lights “to his chambre” (1989). He is brought “to his bedde to be at his rest” (1990). Gawain’s disturbed sleep and anxious thoughts are suggested, like at the close of Fitt I. In the first line of the wheel, the narrator wishes his hero to lie there without stirring: “Let hym lyze þere stille” (1994). The word *stille* is used in the rhyming position and rhymes with the same word spelled slightly differently, *stylle*, as the narrator implores his audience to wait silently for the rest of the story. The *rime riche* underscores the quiet of the night. In the fourth fitt, the latter part of the day is implied by Gawain’s arrival at Camelot after a long journey, and the end of the whole poem is signalled by the transition from oral communication to book reading and writing. In each case, the end of the day’s entertainment implies the end of the job of storytelling, especially as the minstrel-like authorial narrator reveals his presence in these passages and there is parallelism between his verbal act of narration and the court’s speech acts so that it is almost as if he too was about to retire to bed after his day’s work. Interestingly, *fitt* or *fit* has been derived from German *Fitze*, ‘the thread used to mark a day’s work’ (Wheeler). The fitt-endings thus have the illocutionary power to perform narrative closure.

At the end of each fitt, a scene of communal feasting at court is described – at Camelot (Fitt I, IV) and at Hautdesert (Fitt II, III). In Fitt I, the feast proceeds with “alle maner of mete and mynstralcie boþe” (484, all sorts of both food and minstrelsy) and with “wele” (485, delight). In Fitt II, the exchange-of-winnings agreement made between Gawain and the lord of the castle is referred to in terms of the lord’s desire “to layke” (1111, play) and is celebrated by both of them with drinks and laughter (cf. 1112-13), and then by everyone: “Þay drunken and daylyeden and dalten vntyȝtel, / Þise lordez and ladyez, quyle þat hem lyked” (1114-15; they drank and trifled and behaved freely, these lords and ladies, as long as it pleased them). In the last line of the wheel that closes the Fitt, the agreement is again referred to as a form of amusement, “layk” (1125). The scene at the end of Fitt III opens with similar general feasting and merriment following the third day’s exchange of winnings, with an abundance of dishes, the hall resounding with revelry, music-making, ladies’ laughter, and jesting speeches, yet without

overstepping the bounds of propriety: "With merþe and mynstralsye, with metez at hor wylle, / Þay maden as mery as any men mozten – / With lazyng of ladies, with lotez of bordez" (1952-54) and "maden mony iapez" (1957). Overflowing happiness encompasses the entire court, referred to collectively as "þe douthe" (1956, company) and "þe meyny" (1957, 1983; household). In Fitt IV, when Gawain "commes to þe court" (2489) of King Arthur, we are told that there "wakned wele in þat wone" (2490; there arose joy in that abode). Gawain tells them his story with shame, but is comforted by both the king and "alle þe court" (2513): they "[l]aȝen loude þerat" (2514; they laughed aloud at that). The whole "broperhede" of "þe Table" (2515-16) is implicated.

In the fitt-endings the whole court, no doubt present throughout the story, is involved as an audience watching and commenting upon what happens before their eyes. In Fitt I, the Green Knight's unexpected survival and his shocking departure head in hand is declared by the court to be a complete marvel: "Ȝet breued watz hit ful bare / A meruayl among þo menne" (465-66). The phrase *þo menne* (those people), placed emphatically at the very end of the stanza and the wheel, casts the court in the role of spectators and interpreters. The general response is then dialogised between King Arthur, Guinevere, and Gawain. At the end of Fitt II, the court's response to the making of the contract between the lord of the castle and Gawain is given emphasis. In Fitt IV the whole court of Camelot listens to and interprets Gawain's story. Each court is at once a collective protagonist of the story and its listening/reading public. The latter role emerges emphatically in the fitt-endings.

But the fitt-endings also invoke the poem's actual rather than fictive public as they bring to the fore communication between the poet-narrator and his real-life audience. When in the bob of the penultimate stanza of Fitt I the court's hermeneutical impasse is dramatically highlighted by the brief, elliptical question, "What þenne?" (462), it is the poem's addressee that is apparently being interrogated by the authorial narrator at this point. While the question performs transition to the next part of the story by creating narrative suspense, it also situates itself on the borderline between the in-text and the off-text world. The question is reminiscent of the *demande d'amour* type of rhetorical question which creates a pause in the narrative flow, as used by Chaucer at the end of the first part of the *Knight's Tale*.³ In the same

³ Like *Gawain, the Knight's Tale* is a romance in four parts, which are explicitly delineated by Latin inscriptions such as *Explicit prima pars* and *Sequitur pars secunda*, placing Chaucer's romance in a Latinate, non-alliterative literary culture.

fitt-ending, the first-person narrator is implied again as the subject of the enunciation when he directly addresses Gawain in the first line of the fitt's final wheel: "Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan" (487). In the fourth fitt-ending the narrator suggests that he has shaped his poem "[a]s hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce" (2521; as it is written in the best book of romance) and thus reveals himself in the capacity of the writer sharing intertextual space with his reader and other authors. The off-text communication surfaces most clearly in the closing lines of Fitt III, where the authorial narrator suddenly steps in by speaking in the first person and thus drawing attention to his speech acts and his own hermeneutical anxiety: "say ne dar I" (1991). At this point he also directly addresses his public in the final lines of the fitt-closing wheel: "And 3e wyl a whyle be styлле / I schal telle *yow* how þay wro3t" (1996-97, my emphasis; if you are silent for a while, I shall tell you how they acted).

The intersecting vectors of internal and external communication that form part of the festive court scenes described in the fitt-endings of *Gawain* remind me, on the one hand, of Philippe Beaussant's discussion of Paolo Veronese's painting *The Wedding at Cana* as depicting a typical pre-modern feast: a great spectacle with actors, stage, parts, dialogues, play, and audience, with no border between onstage and offstage reality, with the spectators among the decorations and in the depicted crowd, suggesting continuity and ongoing communication between the separate realities within the same space. On the other hand, I am reminded of Gérard Genette's study of the paratext. It is the latter concept more pertinent as it is to *Gawain* as text that I shall adopt in order to further illuminate the nature and functions of the poem's fitt-endings. Apart from being transitional points between successive stages of the narrative, these passages situate themselves on the threshold between the in-text and the off-text reality, which is exactly how Genette defines the paratext.

The paratext is a threshold, "an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside" of the text, "a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*", a privileged place "of an influence on the public, an influence that is at the service of a better reception of the text, a more pertinent reading of it (in the eyes of the author and his allies)" (Genette 1997: 2). Paratexts include such liminal elements as titles, author's name, dedications and inscriptions, prefaces, and epigraphs. Genette acknowledges that "the ways and means of the paratext change continually, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work" etc. (1997: 3). He notes that in the Middle Ages "texts often circulated in an almost raw condition, in the form of manuscripts devoid of any formula of presentation", though "the sole fact of

transcription – but equally of oral transmission – brings to the identity of the text some degree of materialization, graphic or phonic, which may induce paratext effects” (Genette 1997: 3). *Gawain*, even though lacking author’s name and authorial title, employs, in fact, a wider range of paratexts than, say, those of the handwriting or the type of script. There are decorated initials and large illustrations, both of them being probably allographic, that is, provided by someone other than the author. Allographic is probably also a version of the Garter motto in French inscribed in the manuscript at the end of *Gawain* as a kind of epigraph. Certainly authorial, on the other hand, is the closing prayer, which forms a typically medieval paratext: “Now þat bere þe crown of þorne, / He bryng *vous* to his blysse! Amen” (2529-2530, my emphasis; may He who bore the crown of thorns bring us to His bliss). The paratextual character of this prayer lies in the way the authorial narrator, the implicit subject of the enunciation, establishes a bond with his presumably aristocratic fourteenth-century public by using a typical for them form of devotion (for example, Henry Grosmont Duke of Lancaster, who has been considered as the *Gawain*-poet’s possible patron, cherished the holy relic of a thorn from Christ’s mock-crown).

The fitt-endings are less obvious yet equally compelling sites of paratextual effects in *Gawain*. Like the prayers typically closing medieval texts, they underscore closure, though in other than religious terms. The liminal character of the fitt-endings has already been demonstrated above. It remains to be shown how they reveal aspects of the poem’s genre and mode, which Genette considers to be a conventional function of paratexts such as titles and prefaces. The fitt-endings have, in fact, much in common with the preface of sorts that is inserted by the *Gawain*-poet in the latter part of the second stanza of his romance (26b-36), between the poem’s historical prologue or *Vorgeschichte* and the narrative proper. In this literary preface the poet repeatedly speaks in the first-person and adopts the minstrel’s stance (26b, 27, 31), directly addressing his public, “*3e*” (30). Also, the genre of the poem is approximately defined: on the one hand, in terms that underscore the marvellous, as “an aunter” (27, adventure), “a selly” (28, marvel), and “an outrage aventure of Arthurez wonderez” (29, an exceedingly strange adventure of Arthur’s wonders); on the other hand, in terms of “*stori stif and stronge*” (34; brave story), suggestive of the *chanson de gestes* tradition. Furthermore, the romance’s verse form as “*laye*” (30; lay, poem) is indicated, as well as its oral circulation – “as I haf herde telle” (26b), “*lysten*” (30), “*I schal telle hit as-tit, as I in toun herde, / In tonge*” (31-32; I shall tell it at once, aloud, as I have heard it in the court) and, finally, the poem’s alliterative

metre – “with lel letteres loken (35; linked with true letters). The mode of quasi-theatrical showing, along with that of telling, is suggested too: “I attle to *schawe* [...] a selly *in sizt*” (27-28, my emphasis; I intend to show a marvel to see).⁴ The amount of technical vocabulary pertaining to literary art is truly remarkable in this prefatory passage.

The fitt-endings, similarly, point to the poem’s genre and mode. Arthur’s court declares the Green Knight episode to be a complete marvel, and Arthur says that he has seen “a selly” (475), while the penultimate line of the Fitt refers to the poem as “*pis auenture*” (489). Arthur attempts to rationalize what has been seen in terms of typical Christmas “craft” (471, artistry), specifically as the “laykyng of enterludez” (472, playing of interludes). The term *enterludez* suggests various short dramatic or mimic entertainments provided between courses at a banquet (not to be confused with the interlude as specific dramatic genre popular in Tudor England). Arthur mentions interludes along with other typical forms of entertainment, such as courtly “*caroles*” (473; dance-songs) and “*mynstralcie*” (482, minstrelsy; cf. also 1952). The latter term covered a range of entertainments, from musical performance, singing, and dancing to story-telling (cf. *MED*, *minstralsi*). The axe, “*don abof þe dece on doser to henge*” (478, placed above the dais and hung against an ornamental backcloth), where “*alle men for meruayl myzt on hit loke, / And bi trwe tytel þerof to telle þe wonder*” (479-80; where everyone could look at it for marvel and relate the wonder by its true title) is transformed into the token of the Green Knight adventure and its *tytel* at the level of storytelling, bringing to mind book or chapter titles. Similarly, the green girdle becomes “*þe token*” (2509, sign) of Gawain’s adventure in the castle Hautdesert and the Green Chapel, symbolizing to Gawain his dishonesty. Subsequently, the girdle is adopted by Arthur’s court as the sign of their renown. In the final lines, the poem is referred to as “*pis aunter*” (2522), one among many “*aunterez*” (2527) of Britain’s past, and in terms of written tradition, as “*þe best boke of romaunce*” (2521) among “*þe Brutus bokez*” (2523). The titles of the first and the last fitt, as suggested by the poet himself, could therefore be, respectively, “The Axe” and “The Girdle”.

The genre of *Gawain* thus proffered to the reader by the poet himself brings to mind the Arthurian re-enactments that formed part of actual chivalric festivals during the thirteenth and the first half of the

⁴ The apparent interconnection of the medieval discourses of literature and magic, suggested by the terms like *selly in sizt*, is discussed by Kowalik in the context of G. Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* (2022: 181).

fourteenth century, as discussed by Richard Barber.⁵ Arthurian romances were apparently presented at such festivals through dramatic readings and possibly through more developed forms of playacting as a way of fostering chivalric virtue. One type of tournament, in particular, the so-called round tables, combined jousting and Arthurian interludes performed over several days. Accounts of such round tables survive in northern European literary works which allegedly mirror the contemporary social reality. For example, Sarrasin describes in his poem a tournament held in 1278 in northern France, including an interlude enacted during supper on the first day, more interludes on the second day, followed by feasting and dancing, and by jousting only on the third day. There was a mixture of reality and fiction on such occasions as some participants impersonated Arthurian characters while some others appeared as themselves. In a round table held by Edward I, described in detail by the Dutch chronicler Lodewijk van Velthem, jousting initiated by knights with Arthurian identities was followed by a feast at which Arthur refused to eat until he heard some news, which was a signal for playacting to begin. The round table festivals made use of Arthurian dressing up, assigned shields to Arthurian heroes, followed the basic storyline of Arthurian romances, and depended upon carefully written scenarios rather than pure improvisation. The festivals disappear from the records after 1344. In January that year King Edward III held a feast which ended with his promise to found the Round Table, but the project was subsequently abandoned by the king and the Order of the Garter was created instead. *Gawain* is clearly linked to this tradition in general and to the founding of the Order of the Garter in particular, as suggested by the green girdle which is adopted by Arthur's court, called "þe broþerhede" of "þe Table" (2515-16) and "þe Rounde Table" (2519), as the sign of the new order, as well as by the Garter motto appended to the poem at the end of the manuscript.⁶

Apart from helping the reader to identify the poem's genre, the fitt-endings in their paratextual function call attention to other socially significant verbal acts that are at the heart of *Gawain*. In Fitt II, the "forwarde" (1105; agreement) or "bargayn" (1112) concerning the exchange of winnings crucial to the poem's plot is made between the lord of the castle and Gawain in the fitt-ending and the conditions of the agreement, "counenauntez" (1123, terms of compact) are *recorded*, recalled, in the wheel of the last

⁵ The following account is based on Barber (2007: 84-99).

⁶ For a detailed study of the poem's connection to the Order of the Garter see Ingledeu.

stanza. Indeed, “Covenants” could be the title of Fitt II, as suggested by the fitt-ending. Over the two final stanzas of Fitt III, various forms of courtly speech are displayed as Gawain takes leave of his host. Gawain’s polite and appropriately long utterance is quoted. He thanks the lord of the castle for his hospitality and, in an extremely courteous manner, asks to be given a guide to the Green Chapel. After this request is granted and the lord thanks Gawain in return for the honour of entertaining him, Arthur’s knight takes leave of the two ladies. We are told that he parted with them sorrowfully with kisses and many hearty thanks and that they promptly returned him the same and commended him to Christ with extremely sad sighs. Finally, Gawain takes leave of the entire household, honourably thanking everyone for their services, kindness, and solicitude, while the servants are so sorry to part with him as if he had honourably dwelt with them all their lives. Though no title for this longest and most complex fitt, which deftly interweaves the hunt, bedroom, and court scenes, is suggested in the fitt’s ending, the ending foregrounds the intricate relationships developed by Gawain with various members of the Hautdesert household.

The fitt-endings indicate too that the poem is to be taken ultimately in the comic mode. Some of their sentences almost resemble cues for performers. For example, King Arthur’s speech in response to the Green Knight episode is introduced as follows: “Ʒaȝ Arþer þe hende kyng at hert hade wonder, / He let no semblaunt be sene, but sayde ful hyȝe / To þe comlych quene with cortays speche” (467-69), prompting how Arthur’s part is to be performed by whoever reads it aloud. An almost comic effect is created by the transition from Arthur’s feelings, *at hert*, and his struggle not to show them in his appearance, *semblaunt*, to the way he is betrayed by his *ful hyȝe* voice despite managing to address the queen in appropriate courteous manner. Arthur’s understatement when he addresses Gawain is also comical: “Now sir, hang vp þin ax, þat hatz inogh hewen” (477). Basically, the fitt-endings suggest that the story is to be taken in festive, humorous, light-hearted spirit, which ultimately prevails, as conveyed by abundant formulaic diction of mirth. Laughter resounds in all four fitt-endings. In Fitt I we are told that Arthur and Gawain laughed and grinned at the green man: “þay laȝe and grenne” (464), and Arthur points out that it is proper “to laȝe” (472) at Christmas. In Fitt II both Gawain and his host laugh to seal their bargain: “þay laȝed vchone” (1113). In Fitt III the “laȝyng of ladies” (1054) is mentioned. In Fitt IV Arthur’s court laughs loudly in response to Gawain’s story: they “laȝen loude þerat” (2514). Play, *layk*, is another recurrent motif, underscored in two of the fitt-endings: in Fitt I the “laykyng of enterludeȝ” (472, interlude-

playing) is mentioned, and in Fitt II the lord of the castle is described as the one who likes “to layke” (1111, play) and again, in the last line of the wheel, as the one who certainly knew how to keep up the fun, “layk” (1125). Other vocabulary conveying the festive atmosphere includes *mynstralsye*, *mete(z)*, and *wete*, each of which is likewise used in two of the fitt-endings. Table 2 presents the formulaic diction associated with the key semantic threads of the fitt-endings discussed in this paper.

Table 2. Recurrent motifs conveyed by formulaic diction

Motif and diction	Fitt I, 460-90	Fitt II, 1105-25	Fitt III, 1952-97	Fitt IV, 2489-2530
Whole court	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>knwe non bere</i> - <i>þay (x2)</i> - <i>þo menne</i> - <i>knyztez and ladyez</i> - <i>alle men</i> - <i>kene men hem serued</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>þay (x2), hem, her</i> - <i>þise lordez and ladyez</i> - <i>with mony leude ful lyzt</i> - <i>vche burne</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>þay (x4), hor (x2), hem</i> - <i>as any men</i> - <i>þe douthe</i> - <i>þe meyny (x2)</i> - <i>burnez</i> - <i>vche mon þat he mette</i> - <i>vche segge</i> - <i>ledes</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>þe court</i> - <i>in þat wone</i> - <i>þe grete</i> - <i>hym (them)</i> - <i>mony syker knyzt</i> - <i>alle þe court</i> - <i>lordes and ladis þat longed to þe Table</i> - <i>vche burne of þe broþerhede</i> - <i>þe Rounde Table</i>

Motif and diction	Fitt I, 460-90	Fitt II, 1105-25	Fitt III, 1952-97	Fitt IV, 2489-2530
<p>Festive atmosphere, mirth, laughter, play, eating and drinking</p>	<p>- þay laze and grenne</p> <p>- Cristmasse</p> <p>- Laykyng of enterludez</p> <p>- to laze and to syng</p> <p>- þise kynde caroles</p> <p>- to my mete I may me wel dres</p> <p>- þay bozed to a borde</p> <p>- of alle dayntygez double, as derrest myzt falle</p> <p>- wyth alle maner of mete and mynstralcie boþe</p> <p>- wyth wele walt þay þat day</p>	<p>- and þat yow lyst for to layke</p> <p>- Who bryngez vus þis beuerage</p> <p>- þay lazed vchone</p> <p>- þay dronken and daylyeden and dalten vntyztel [...] quyle þat hem liked</p> <p>- Cowþe wel halde l ayk alofte</p>	<p>- With merþe and mynstralsye, wyth metez at hor wyllle</p> <p>- Þay maden as mery as any men mozten</p> <p>- With lazyng of ladies</p> <p>- with lotez of bordes</p> <p>- maden mony iapez</p> <p>- at þis hyze fest</p> <p>- blyþely</p>	<p>- Þer wakned wele</p> <p>- Þe kyng comfortez þe knyzt, and alle þe court als</p> <p>- lazen loude þerat</p>

Motif and diction	Fitt I, 460-90	Fitt II, 1105-25	Fitt III, 1952-97	Fitt IV, 2489-2530
<p>End of day, bedtime, parting company, end of book</p>	<p>- <i>til worped an ende in londe</i></p>	<p>- <i>kysten ful comlyly and kazten her leue</i></p> <p>- <i>With lemande torches vche burne to his bed watz brozt at þe laste, ful softe</i></p> <p>- <i>To bed zet er þay zede</i></p>	<p>- <i>Til þe sesoun watz sezen þat þay seuer moste</i></p> <p>- <i>Burnez to hor bedde behoued at þe laste</i></p> <p>- <i>his leue at þe lorde fyrst / Fochchez þis fre mon</i></p> <p>- <i>Þen at þo ladyez wolonk / Þe knyzt hatz tan his leue</i></p> <p>- <i>Syþen fro þe meyny he menskly departes</i></p> <p>- <i>soré to seuer</i></p> <p>- <i>he watz ladde to his chambre and blyþely brozt to his bedde to be at his rest</i></p> <p>- <i>zif he ne slepe soundyly</i></p> <p>- <i>Let hym lyze þere stille</i></p>	<p>- <i>Amen.</i></p>

Motif and diction	Fitt I, 460-90	Fitt II, 1105-25	Fitt III, 1952-97	Fitt IV, 2489-2530
Acts of interpretation	<p>- <i>knwe non þer</i></p> <p>- <i>What þenne?</i></p> <p>- <i>Ȝet breued watz hit ful bare / A meruayl</i></p> <p>- <i>Arþer þe hende kyng at hert hade wonder</i></p> <p>- <i>Wel bycommes such craft</i></p> <p>- <i>I haf sen a selly</i></p> <p>- <i>bi trwe tytel þerof to telle þe wonder</i></p> <p>- <i>Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan</i></p>	<p>- <i>lef hit me þynkes</i></p> <p>- <i>Þay stoden and stemmed and styilly speken</i></p> <p>- <i>Recorded couenauntez ofte</i></p>	<p>- <i>For he hade muche on þe morn to mynne, if he wolde, / In þoȝt</i></p>	<p>- <i>gayn hit hym þoȝt</i></p> <p>- <i>Þis is þe bende of þis blame</i></p> <p>- <i>þe token of vntrawþe</i></p> <p>- <i>lufllyly acorden a bauderyk schulde haue</i></p> <p>- <i>þat watz accorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table</i></p> <p>- <i>As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce</i></p> <p>- <i>Þe Brutus bokez þerof berez wyttensse</i></p>

A final paratextual feature to be noted in the fitt-endings is their foregrounding of acts of interpretation. From the universal ignorance about the Green Knight’s whereabouts asserted at the end of the penultimate stanza of Fitt I, “knwe non þere” (460), the ensuing question *What þenne?* in the bob of the same stanza, followed by the court’s interpretative declaration in the wheel, *breued watz hit*, as well as the king’s *wonder* and the narrator’s turn to Gawain’s thoughts (*þenk wel*) in the Fitt’s final stanza; through emphasis on Gawain’s thoughts (*to mynne; in þoȝt*) at the end of Fitt III and

his personal interpretation of the meaning of the girdle against the court's communal re-interpretation of it (they *acorden*) at the end of Fitt IV; up to the narrator's turn to books and writing (*hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce; þe Brutus bokez*) towards the end of the poem and the injunction not to *mal pence* (think ill) in the appended Garter motto – the endings bring into focus hermeneutical activity in the in-text world which in turn provides models of analogous activity for the poem's external audience. The boundaries in the triangle of the poem's characters, its internal, fictional audience, and its real-life public are fluid. At the end of Fitt I Arthur and Gawain behave like actors, each properly enacting his social role of, respectively, king and hero, but at the same time they are spectators struggling to interpret the marvellous *enterludez* of the Green Knight. The collective court's hermeneutical engagement as commentators of what is going on at its centre is underlined in Fitt II: "And syþen with Frenkysch fare and fele fayre lotez / Þay stoden and stemmed and stylly speken" (1116-17; and afterwards with French observances and many courteous words they stood about, hesitated, and spoke softly/secretly). This apparently French-speaking and Francophile court, cast in the role of fictional audience, parallels the poem's external Anglo-Norman aristocratic audience. The courtiers' comments are not disclosed to the reader, though, being uttered as *style* as they would have been at a real-life court. The reader is thus challenged to undertake his/her own interpretative effort. As modern readers, we may be missing an underlying conceptual grid that would allow us to make full sense of all this, but to my mind the paratext is a useful modern concept that captures such liminal effects.

3. Closing

The fitt-endings in *Gawain* perform the completion of a fitt through formulaic language and narrative, rather than by simply announcing it or suggesting it visually. The fitt-endings thus confirm the romance's four-part construction based on the manuscript's large decorated initials and indicate that intermission in a dramatic reading of the poem may be intended at these points. The division into four parts parallels, in terms of sheer number and the idea of progression, the four seasons of the year so beautifully described at the outset of Fitt II, a passage which might be yet another site of paratextuality in *Gawain*. The four-part division also parallels the manuscript's bringing together of four poems. Other divisions of *Gawain* within this

principal structure, whether those based on the remaining decorated initials or those derived from the poem's inherent sense, are by no means excluded by the present argument.⁷ The fitt-endings encapsulate, as I have argued, the author's paratextual concerns. The anonymity of many medieval texts or their lack of titles does not mean that these texts are devoid of paratextual information for, as Genette points out, "a text without a paratext does not exist and never has existed" (1997: 3). Paratextuality in an age of manuscript culture, of textuality mixed with orality, when the familiar paratextual conventions like title and author's name at the head of the text had not yet crystallized, had different forms, though. Some typically medieval paratexts have been discussed in this paper: in particular, the narrative indication of the completion of a fitt, the special role of the first fitt in terms of salesmanship, the text-closing prayer, and the Garter motto at the end of *Gawain* as a kind of epigraph. One can formulate a tentative conclusion that there is a tendency in this literary tradition to locate paratextual information at the end rather than at the outset of a text and to disperse paratextuality over a text. Medieval paratextuality is a vast yet somewhat neglected field of study. It is hoped that this paper will encourage further research into this fascinating field.

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⁷ For a different proposition concerning the poem's division see Robertson. He points out, for example, that Gawain retires to bed accompanied with torches also in lines 988-97, in the latter part of Fitt II (Robertson 1982: 782). In fact, the whole stanza of which these lines form part has much in common with the fitt-endings as discussed in this paper, yet it lacks the paratextual dimension crucial for my argument.

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