'Whereof Bretouns maked her layes': Audience Expectations and the Middle English Breton Lays

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The medieval literary works that have been identified as Breton lays have many characteristics in common. Yet the contours of the genre are not fully understood, and how the Breton lay operates as a distinct genre has been a topic of some debate and discussion among scholars of medieval literature. While exploring medieval romance, Gail Ashton notes that she has chosen to explore texts that are known as Breton lays, but that the description of the Breton lay as a distinct genre creates problems, and that the Breton lay should be considered a subgenre of romance instead of a separate literary genre.[1] Similarly, in their general introduction to *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Laskaya and Salisbury argue that modern scholars have struggled with defining the Breton lay as a distinct genre that is separate from romance.[2]

The numerous medieval references to the Breton lay genre might suggest that it was recognizable among its contemporary audiences. A contemporary audience may have had different expectations of what a Breton lay should be than modern scholars now have. It is important to keep these differing expectations in mind, since Hans Robert Jauss has argued that any proper analysis of a narrative should include, if not focus on, how the work was received by its contemporary audiences.[3] So, the perspective of medieval audiences can provide valuable insight into what constitutes the Breton lay genre. Though we may assume that medieval audiences would have been aware of Breton lay texts, there is not much known about what they would have expected from these narratives. Modern scholars may know what to expect from a text that is classified as a Breton lay, but it is not clear to what extent these modern expectations reflect what medieval audiences would have expected from the lays.

Therefore, this thesis will examine the expectations of medieval audiences regarding the Middle English Breton lays. In order to keep the research focused, the following chapters will center around the Middle English Breton lays in particular. Since there is no written evidence detailing exactly how medieval audiences felt about the Breton lays and there are no medieval reviews of them, examining expectations will require a few different approaches. By concentrating on the Middle English Breton lays I hope to offer some specific insights into the texts that will help in establishing audiences' expectations. One of the reasons for the focus on the Middle English lays in this thesis is for their inclusion in the Auchinleck Manuscript, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1. As will be shown further on

[1]Gail Ashton. *Medieval English Romance in Context*. Texts and Contexts. London: Continuum, 2010. 44.
[2]Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. *The Middle English Breton Lays.* "General introduction".
[3]Hans Robert Jauss. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception.* Translated by Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

in the thesis, this manuscript was written almost entirely in English and it has much to offer for establishing expectations for the Breton lays.

The first chapter of this thesis will first explore the characteristics of Breton lays as they have been established by scholars of the works. In doing so, it will provide a list of characteristics that modern scholars now believe are identifying features of the Breton lay texts. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss the ideas about literary analysis of Hans Robert Jauss and Fredric Jameson, who both argue for the importance of exploring texts within their cultural contexts. I will establish the value of their arguments and how they will further the exploration of the Breton lays and expectations for them.

The second chapter will explore the value of studying texts within their particular manuscript contexts. It will focus on the Auchinleck manuscript and argue that this manuscript, which is almost entirely filled with English texts, was the product of a deliberate compilation. Moreover, it will discuss the importance of the manuscript's predominantly English contents and establish why it will be valuable to look at the Breton lays in context to the manuscript's other texts.

The third chapter will closely follow the second in that it will examine the different texts of the Auchinleck manuscript. The first section will specifically examine those texts that surround the manuscript's Middle English Breton lays and briefly explore each of them. In particular, the section will explore one text preceding a Breton lay in the manuscript and one text that follows. The discussion of each group of three texts, consisting of a lay and its surrounding texts, will start with a brief summary of the Breton lay in question and then be followed by a brief discussion of the text preceding and the one following the Breton lay. Finally, the chapter will conclude with thoughts on the different combinations of texts in the Auchinleck manuscript and how the texts surrounding the Breton lays would influence audiences' expectations for the lays themselves, or rather, what the neighbouring texts may say about the lays.

The fourth and final chapter will briefly discuss what the Breton lays' audiences might have looked like, in the sense of, what kind of people would have read or seen the lays performed. Furthermore, the chapter will closely analyse the three Breton lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript, *Sir Orfeo, Lay le Freine* and *Sir Degaré* and how they identify themselves. It will do so firstly by looking at the prologues and introductions of these lays and examining lines in which the lays make clear statements concerning how they function as Breton lays. Secondly, it will compare the different ways in which the lays portray their Breton identity and look at any similarities that might provide arguments for possible audience

expectations. In so doing, the thesis will establish some important aspects of the lays' identification that provide insights into the possible expectations that medieval audiences would have had regarding the Breton lays.

CHAPTER 1 – THE SCHOLARLY APPROACH TO BRETON LAYS

The general consensus among scholars seems to be that the Breton lay is not a genre by itself but that it should be seen as a part of the romance genre. However, despite the unstable status of the Breton lay as a distinct genre, scholars have their own clear ideas regarding what the lays entail and how they fit within a specific literary tradition. For this thesis it is most important to establish what general characteristics scholars have encountered in their research of the surviving texts that have been identified as Breton Lays. Although it is also important to mention why the Breton Lay as a genre has, by some, been deemed problematic, the focus of the current research will lie with establishing a range of general characteristics for the lays. Despite the Breton lay's status as a genre separate from the romance genre still being a subject of discussion among scholars, most scholars do have clear thoughts on what themes and motifs can be found in texts that belong to the Breton Lay tradition. Yet, scholars' research on the Breton lays has been primarily directed at the literary aspects and not so much on how the texts might have been received by a contemporary audience. Considering that the current thesis is concerned with examining a contemporary audience's expectations for a Breton Lay, the audience and the reception of the lays should take precedent over establishing the lays' characteristics. However, in order to fully explore the Breton Lay and its possible audience expectations it is vital to first explore the expectations of an audience that are more easily accessible: those of modern scholars.

This chapter will explore how different scholars have responded to the Breton lay genre and how they would characterise the texts. It will do so by briefly reiterating what they have noted in relation to the lays and how their ideas differ or correspond to those of other scholars. Additionally, the chapter will explore some notions regarding literary theory by Hans Robert Jauss and Fredric Jameson and how these notions offer a starting point for examining the medieval audiences' expectations surrounding Breton lays.

Scholarly expectations

This section will explore how different scholars have attempted to define the Breton lay over many decades. While this thesis seeks to reconstruct medieval audiences' expectations surrounding the Breton lays, there are quite a few influential scholars who have sought to define the Breton lay and establish its identity over the years. As such, I believe it will be valuable to

consider these scholars' definitions and view how these definitions may have been altered, or built upon, by other scholars as more and more research was done.

One of the earlier descriptions of the Breton lay as a genre is given by William Henry Schofield at the turn of the twentieth century. In his definition Schofield seems to be especially focused on the Breton aspect of the lays. In describing the identity of the Breton lay Schofield seems mostly concerned with the lay's origins to confirm its identity. Indeed, Schofield puts particular emphasis on the early Celtic origins of the texts and through that determines they are Breton lays. Schofield states that, "a lay is a 'Breton' lay, whether it embodies foreign or native material, so long as the material was popularly current among the Celts and not regarded by them as essentially different from their other traditions."[4] Evidently, Schofield thought it most important to the characterisation of the Breton lay that it was a story that was actually written by Celts, or Bretons as these Celts would have been called once they had settled in Brittany. Moreover, Schofield once more emphasises his focus on the Celtic origin of the lays by saying: "Any story was readily accepted if it was to the popular liking, and it thereupon became an unquestioned Breton possession. If such a story, thus adopted by them, and popularly current in their language, was put into lay form, it was justly called a "Breton lay;" and it was also entitled to that name after it was re-written in French verse."[5] Therefore, according to this early description of the Breton lay by Schofield, the only identification of the Breton lay can be found in its Celtic, or Breton, origins rather than with the contents or characteristics of the texts themselves.

Another influential scholar who made an early attempt at defining the Breton lay is A.C. Baugh. Baugh seems to be one of the first to be more specific in his definition of the Breton lay while also noting the large range of subjects that make defining the Breton lay's characteristics that much more difficult. Moreover, his definition also provides the basis for arguments made by scholars in later years. In his work *A Literary History of England* Baugh states the following concerning the Breton lay:

> Certainly there is nothing distinctive in the subject or treatment of the so-called Breton lays in English, and whether a given short romance is called a Breton lay or not depends mainly on whether it says it is one, has its scene laid in Brittany, contains a passing reference to Brittany, or tells a story found among the lais of Marie de France."

[4]William Henry Schofield. "Chaucer's Franklin's Tale." Reprint from *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. xvi, no.3 (1901): 434.
[5]William Henry Schofield. "Chaucer's Franklin's Tale." 435.

Baugh is the first of many – as will be shown further on – to note that there is something about the Breton lays that makes it difficult to establish a steadfast set of characteristics for the genre. Indeed, Baugh seems to be one of the first to give Marie de France's work as an example for defining the Breton lay. Moreover, Baugh seems to have worked on Schofield's ideas of the Breton importance in the lays, and given it more in depth analysis. While Baugh does note the importance of Brittany in the above excerpt, he evidently does not deem the Celtic, or Breton origin of the lay itself of as much importance as Schofield did. Rather, Baugh seems to argue that there need only be a minor reference to Brittany for a lay to become a Breton lay. Furthermore, while Baugh's definition has proven influential among later scholars, it is still rather vague in the sense that he barely notes anything about the lays' contents. Much like Schofield's description of the lay, the focus of Baugh's description lies in the lays' origins, rather than their contents.

Both Schofield and Baugh's descriptions have been influential, but given that they were written many decades ago, it is useful to turn to more contemporary scholars. One scholar whose work on the Breton lay is a bit more recent than Baugh and Schofield and who has done some in-depth research on Breton lays is Leo Carruthers. In his own definition of the Breton lay, Carruthers seems to rely on the early definitions by Baugh and Schofield. Carruthers notes that, "The 'Breton lay' is not easy to pin down because the characteristics of the genre are ill-defined, even within the broader category of 'romance' which, in turn, has almost no frontiers."[6] Although he does not state that he used Baugh's earlier definition, Carruthers does describe a characteristic of the Breton lays, that Baugh also found important. According to Carruthers: "A poem is a Breton lay first of all because it says it is one, or, if it does not actually use the word 'lay' (most of them do), it claims to be part of a British/Breton tradition."[7] Additionally, Carruthers notes that although the lays claim to be of Breton origin, the very first examples of such texts can be found written in the Old French of the twelfth century. Furthermore, Carruthers points out that many authors of Breton lays claimed that their tales were based on songs sung by Breton minstrels. Moreover, Carruthers argues that any claims of belonging to the Breton lay genre made by the poets were not necessarily based on the setting of the lay but rather its transmission. In short, Carruthers argues that the one constant in Breton lays is that

[6] Leo Carruthers. "What Makes Breton Lays 'Breton'? Bretons, Britons and Celtic 'otherness' in Medieval Romance." Études Épistémè 25, no. 25 (2014): Études Épistémè, 2014-11-12, Vol.25 (25). 1.
[7] *Ibid.,* 1.

they announce their identity as a lay and find their Breton origin in the oral transmission of British minstrels or their setting in Brittany.[8]

Gail Ashton notes a similar "controversy surrounding the lays' classification" and argues that "they are often hybrid as opposed to pure forms with all the ambivalences of meaning that attend in these generically indeterminate instances."[9] Yet while Ashton, much like Carruthers, questions whether the Breton lay can be considered a distinct genre, she does offer some clear thoughts on what sort of characteristics she has found in texts that identify as Breton lays. First of all, Ashton states that most Breton lays "are set in Brittany, Normandy or Wales and exhibit features of oral performance as befits their roots in minstrelsy."[10] This observation seems to work similar to the earlier definition by Baugh. Additionally, Ashton argues that the poems oftentimes emphasise the theme of love and hold elements of faery.[11] Furthermore, Ashton explores the faery elements of the Breton lays within a fundamentally British tradition, arguing faery was "part of a tradition of magic that allegedly transferred to Britanny from Britain when the ancient Celts fled there in the fifth century."[12] What Ashton states here seems very closely related to what Schofield also implied in the description of the Breton lay that he gave decades earlier, therefore there must be some merit in the argument. Interestingly, a lot of Ashton's research on the Breton lays seems to be reliant on the work of Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury – who in turn have used Baugh's early definition for the Breton lay in their research– which is why the next discussion will look at the work of these two prominent scholars. Moreover, Ashton is another scholar who overlooks audiences' perspectives in her discussion of the Breton lay, meaning that she establishes the text's prominent features by describing the shared characteristics of the different lays rather than exploring what a contemporary audience might have found characteristic in the works.

Laskaya and Salisbury's work *The Middle English Breton Lays* contains editions of, and information on, some of the most well-known surviving Breton lays. Moreover, it also provides an overview of what they view as important features and characteristics of the texts. In their general introduction, Laskaya and Salisbury first note that "the Breton lay may refer to any of the poems produced between approximately 1150 and 1450 which claim to be literary versions of lays sung by ancient Bretons to the accompaniment of the harp."[13] Immediately apparent is that they, too, view Breton lays as having some relation to Breton minstrelsy—whether

[8]Leo Carruthers. "What Makes Breton Lays 'Breton'? Bretons, Britons and Celtic 'otherness' in Medieval Romance, 1.
[9] Gail Ashton. *Medieval English Romance in Context*. Texts and Contexts. London: Continuum, 2010. 44.
[10] *Ibid.,* 43.
[11] *Ibid.,* 43.
[12] *Ibid.,* 44.
[13]Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. *The Middle English Breton Lays.* "General introduction".

fictional or historical. Additionally, Laskaya and Salisbury note that the fame of the Breton lay as a literary genre can be attributed to Marie de France: "whose twelve lays immortalize this tradition of Breton storytelling in the twelfth century."[14] Marie de France's supposed immortalisation of the genre is one thing that most scholars seem to have agreed upon. It seems that this is one of the recognised features that show the influence of Baugh on research into the Breton lay genre. While Laskaya and Salisbury argue for roughly the same characteristics of the Breton lays as the previously discussed scholars, there is one argument in which they stand out. Unlike most other scholars, Laskaya and Salisbury also name the fact that "a genre as elusive as Middle English Breton Lay demands considerations of its interaction with an actual audience whose interests and concerns are their subjects."[15] However, their own attempt to define the Breton lays, does not directly take into account contemporary audiences' perspectives. Like the other scholars under discussion here, Laskaya and Salisbury seem to focus on looking at the texts and describing what characteristics they see.

As has been previously shown, most scholars are in agreement about what themes and motifs can often be found in texts that we now label as Breton lays. Of course, most of these themes and motifs stem from scholars looking at a group of texts and finding shared characteristics, rather than thorough research into how medieval readers would have approached Breton lays. Out of these different scholarly observations a short list of generally agreed upon characteristics of the Breton lay can be established. First and foremost is the idea that all Breton lays involve a reference to Brittany; they are either set in that particular region or claim to be part of the Breton tradition, and sometimes both. Additionally, most of the texts' poets are particularly resolute in stating that their narrative is a Breton lay. The stories often contain a theme of love, and are occasionally infused with elements of fairy.

Although it is clear that scholars have reached some consensus regarding what the Breton lays are about, we have not yet established how the lays might have been received in the times that they were produced. Since most of the still existing lays were dated to the period between 1150 and 1450,[16] it is only sensible that we try and establish what audiences from that time would have expected of the lays. As such, it should prove fruitful to examine the texts from medieval audiences' perspective, rather than rely exclusively on what scholars have come to expect from the lays.

Connecting the theories

[14]Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. *The Middle English Breton Lays.* "General introduction".
[15]*Ibid.,* general introduction.
[16]*Ibid.,* general introduction.

In the scholarly world of genre theory and literary analysis, there are many different opinions regarding how certain works should be approached. Most researchers of the Breton lay have focused mainly on what characteristics and motifs they have found in the texts themselves. Yet, that approach leaves the perspective of medieval audiences out, this is slightly problematic as other scholars have found particular merit in examining texts from an audience perspective. Indeed, some scholars have argued that it is especially key to consider a given text in relation to its contemporary audiences. Hans Robert Jauss is particularly adamant on approaching texts with their contemporary audiences in mind. The following section will explain Jauss's theory regarding the "horizon of expectations"[17] that audiences have for any given text and explore how this horizon can be useful in exploring the Breton lay genre.

Most philologists, like those previously discussed, have their own ideas and opinions regarding how texts should be read and what is most important in analysing them. Yet, Jauss finds that the philologist, even those who claim to look at a text objectively, can never reach true objectivism: "Philological understanding always remains related to interpretation that must set at its goal, along with learning about the object, the reflection on and description of the completion of this knowledge as a moment of new understanding."[18] It is essentially impossible for any and all scholars to truly remain objective when analysing or reading a text. Every scholar has particular approaches and opinions informed by previous research and experiences, and these approaches and opinions will always factor into with whatever project or analysis they are trying to complete.

Moreover, Jauss argues that a modern reader cannot hope to view a work the same way as a contemporary reader did: "A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers."[19] Similarly, Jauss notes that, "In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of the active participation of its addressees."[20] By stating this Jauss is also referring to the fact that many scholars seem to overlook contemporary audiences in their analysis of historical works. They would generally rather focus on either what the work itself portrays or what the authors' intentions for the work's meaning were. Now although these two features are indeed very important, when a scholar is analysing a historical text, the

[17] Hans Robert Jauss. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception.* Translated by Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982. 22.
[18] *Ibid.,* 21.
[19] *Ibid.*, 21.
[20]Hans Robert Jauss. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception.* 19.

contemporary audiences' expectations regarding the work might offer a great deal more information than mere textual analysis.. The previously noted being especially relevant to those works that lack an identifiable author or specific documentation surrounding it.

Essentially then in analysing medieval texts we must always keep in mind that we simply cannot understand them in the same way that medieval audiences did. Because our present day minds are influenced by present day norms; there is no way to read a text and expect to take away the same things from it that medieval audiences would have taken. Nevertheless, it should be valuable to attempt to reconstruct the views of medieval audiences on the Breton lays, rather than simply looking at the texts and describing what we see. What then remains to be understood, is how Jauss imagines a text should be examined, and how the expectations of a text's contemporary audiences can be beneficial for such an examination.

Jauss aims to show that every reader has a horizon of expectations. Whenever, a new work is produced it "evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced."[21]According to Jauss these expectations are ever present, even when a work appears to be new, or, without any similar predecessors.[22] One would think that when a work is entirely new that people would have no thoughts on what to expect from it. Yet, Jauss argues that even in the case of a new work, audiences will always have certain expectations. For one, the beginning of any work can invoke expectations from its reader regarding what the middle and end will bring and, in the course of reading, these expectations might be confirmed or altered.[23] Following this explanation of the horizon of expectations comes Jauss's fourth thesis regarding the way literary history should be viewed. Part of Jauss's thesis is of particular relevance to the current investigation:

> The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations, in the face of which a work was created and received in the past, enables one on the other hand to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and thereby to discover how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work.[24]

Evidently, Jauss's focus in literary analysis is not solely aimed at textual analysis and looking at its linguistics or structure, but rather with the surrounding cultural circumstances that a work

[21] Hans Robert Jauss. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. 23.
[22] *Ibid.,* 23.
[23] *Ibid.,* 23.
[24] *Ibid.,* 28.

was produced in. It would stand to reason that the horizon of expectations of any given audience was strongly influenced by any and all momentous events in their respective times. If a land had been ravaged by war, contemporary audiences of that time would expect far different poetry to circulate than contemporary audiences of a land at peace. Therefore, in order to follow Jauss's theory of looking at a work through its contemporary audiences, it must first be established what those audiences' horizons of expectations looked like. The arguably cultural approach that Jauss takes to looking at historical works can be productively connected to Fredric Jameson's view of genre theory. Both of these scholars argue that the circumstances surrounding the physical work are of great importance when analysing literary works. Whether these circumstances consist of cultural change or audiences' identities and expectations, they are equally important to literary analysis according to both scholars. The following section will show how Jameson's theory fits into this culturally focused literary analysis.

Jameson finds that when it comes to genre theory there are essentially two approaches that can be taken by scholars: "the *semantic* and the structural or *syntactic* approach."[25] In this sense the semantic approach, as Jameson describes it, "may be characterized as the substitution, for the individual work in question, of some more generalized existential experience of which a description is then given which can range from the impressionistic to the phenomenologically rigorous."[26] The semantic approach then is looking at "the meaning of genre."[27] This approach puts the text in dialogue with the genre as a whole in order to find meaning in it, rather than analysing the text as a lone entity. Any given text might carry meaning when analysed on its own, but when the text is examined within the more broad tradition of a genre, this meaning could completely alter. The syntactic approach, as Jameson describes it, is the more scientific of the two approaches. When looking at, for instance, the comedy genre from a syntactic approach, comedy becomes "a determinate laughter-producing mechanism with precise laws and requirements of its own, resulting, not in the expression of meaning, but rather the building of a *model*."[28]

Essentially then, the semantic approach is more focused on meaning and looking beyond the mere physical text as a standalone item, whereas the syntactic approach is focused entirely on the text itself and what it describes. Furthermore, Jameson argues that any individual work can show some aspects of cultural and literary change, but, that it can never truly function as

[25] Fredric Jameson. "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre." 137.
[26] *Ibid.,* 137.
[27] *Ibid.,* 136.
[28] *Ibid.,* 137.

the sole source on those changes; there is always more to take into consideration.[29] Rather, Jameson says that the focus should lie with the genre as a whole: "Only the history of the forms themselves can provide an adequate mediation between the perpetual change of social life on the one hand, and the closure of the individual work on the other."[30] Jameson, like Jauss, shows how genres can give us insights into given cultural moments. According to the theories of both, genres are not mere reflections of rules and characteristics that certain works need to follow in order to belong; rather, they give insight into specific cultural circumstances of the places that the works were produced.

Jameson's focus on the cultural circumstances surrounding works is exactly how his and Jauss's theories are alike. As can be drawn from the previous arguments, both Jameson and Jauss are interested in the ways in which genres reflect and shape their cultural contexts. They are in agreement that analysing a literary text should not be solely about the text itself but rather about its place within the larger picture of genre. Furthermore, finding how the genres reflect their cultural contexts gives us a better sense of the cultures that produced them as well. Jauss and Jameson's theories combined offer a good starting point for examining medieval audiences' expectations for the Breton lay, yet these theories also bring forth some difficulties for such an examination.

This thesis aims to examine what medieval audiences' expectations for the Breton lay would have been using some of Jauss and Jameson's theories. Jauss's theory on the horizon of expectations is very useful in supporting an examination audiences' expectations for any given literary text. However, his theory also becomes somewhat problematic in nature when put to a medieval genre such as the Breton lay. Since there is not much physical documentation surviving from the period in which the Breton lays were written, which was approximately 1150 to 1450 according to Laskaya and Salisbury, it is rather more difficult to establish a horizon of expectations for the Breton lay's contemporary audiences. In fact, the horizons of expectations of medieval audiences are fundamentally mediated by other contemporary texts besides the Breton lays. For example, if a medieval audience was thoroughly exposed to religious texts meant to teach them moral lessons, than their expectations for other texts might have been influenced by them. As such, the audiences would perhaps expect other texts, such as the Breton lays, to also teach them moral lessons or they would at least look at the lays different, since they could have their previously established religious morals in mind. Similar to what Jameson argues, in the case of an examination of the Breton lay it is important to look

[29]Fredric Jameson. "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre."136.
[30]*Ibid.,* 136.

at several texts to get a feeling of the genre as a whole. Additionally, because existing Breton lays are not so numerous as we might like, Jameson's theory on looking at more than one text should also be applied to looking at texts outside of the genre.

There are a few approaches that can be taken to establish what medieval audiences might have expected from the Breton lays. First of all, as previously mentioned, it should prove worthwhile to consider several Breton lays that were produced, or copied, in close proximity to each other. One of the most straightforward ways to achieve such a goal would be by examining lays that were copied together into a single manuscript as they were likely assembled together for a reason. Moreover, such a manuscript might hold other types of texts whose existence in relation to the lays could offer insights as to what was expected of the lays. For instance, a lay might have infidelity as a theme and then be paired with a religious text that warns about the dangers of infidelity and other vices within the manuscript. Another way in which audiences' expectations could be established is through an examination of the audiences themselves. For instance, as noted before, the people of a land at war might expect poems emphasising the pain of loss or celebrating nationalistic feelings, rather than cheery poems about the bloom of spring.

It should be said that whatever approach is taken, any arguments will undoubtedly have to be based on assumptions, however well founded, since a lack of documentation surrounding the Breton lays limits the factual arguments that can be made. The remainder of this thesis, then, will focus mainly on those documents and scholarly works that can provide some insight into what expectations the contemporary audiences of the Breton lay might have had. These documents will include scholarly work on the Breton lay genre, several Middle English Breton lays and a Middle English manuscript that contains three of these Breton lays.

CHAPTER 2: A STUDY OF THE AUCHINLECK MANUSCRIPT

This thesis's goal is to examine medieval audiences' expectations for Breton lays. There are several routes that a scholar can take in order to come up with some a range of works that might have been familiar to medieval audiences. This chapter will focus on one way of examining the Breton lays within their cultural contexts, namely through their position in a medieval manuscript. The primary sources for the examination of Breton Lays in this thesis are those lays that can be found in the famous Auchinleck Manuscript, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1. The manuscript is home to many Middle English texts including the Breton Lays: *Sir Degare, Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*. As previously noted, a manuscript such as the Auchinleck MS might hold other types of texts whose existence in relation to the lays could offer insights as to what was expected of the lays themselves. When paired with a religious text that teaches morals and values, the lays, may show that they were meant for more than just entertainment purposes. For instance, a lay may treat many different subjects that seem completely unrelated to any kind of moral lessons. However, when such a lay would be paired with a religious text that teaches moral lessons on the importance of friendship and loyalty, the former may be shown to serve a didactic purpose as well. This didactic purpose could simply mean that the lay's narrative portrays good and loyal friends who have good things happen to them because of their loyalty and friendship.

This chapter will discuss the value of examining the aforementioned Breton Lays within the context of a manuscript. In order to do so it will examine the value of manuscript study and how this might further an understanding of the texts it holds. Moreover, the chapter will focus specifically on the Auchinleck Manuscript, its history and why it will prove especially valuable to examine the Breton lays contained in it.

Manuscript study and the Auchinleck Manuscript

According to Ralph Hanna, one of the reasons that manuscript study is valuable is because "books are, within certain limits, localizable, they enable the construction of historical narratives."[31] Unlike a person's expectations, which are difficult to reconstruct, a manuscript is a piece of physical evidence that allows for historical research to be done. At some point in time the manuscript had to have been made somewhere and someone must have deemed the

[31]Ralph Hanna. "Reconsidering the Auchinleck Manuscript." In *New Directions in Later Medieval Manuscript Studies: Essays from the 1998 Harvard Conference*, by Derek Pearsall et al. Boydell & Brewer, 2000. 91.

texts that it is comprised of important enough to have wanted them written down. Correspondingly, we might assume that texts that have been bound together in a single manuscript have a similar purpose or even, a joint one. For instance, a manuscript containing only comedic poems would likely have only served as entertainment, or a manuscript containing only religious didactic texts may have served those of the clerical profession in educating others and so forth. Similarly, in her discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Gail Ashton sees the poem's placement in a manuscript alongside *Pearl, Cleanness* and *Patience* as noteworthy; the placement of this poem could impact the way the poem should be interpreted.[32] Ashton considers the specific implications of *Sir Gawain's* position among the other three texts: "Most scholars agree that, with the exception of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, these are moral works that raise questions about *Sir Gawain's* meaning and its connection to its companion pieces."[33] Clearly, Ashton, along withother scholars, believe that the texts that were paired with *Sir Gawain* in the manuscript should be considered in relation to the famous poem, since these texts were likely placed together for a particular reason. The combination of a romance with such moral texts as were previously mentioned, could imply that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may also have served some didactic purpose. As such, it could be argued that the texts of the Auchinleck MS might share a similar connection and that they too should be considered collectively as well as individually.

The next section will give some brief information on the Auchinleck MS as it is not only the contents of the manuscript that may provide insights for the current research, but also the historical and cultural implications of its composition. Laskaya and Salisbury have found that the Auchinleck Manuscript is "a tremendously important anthology dating from about 1330-40."[34] In support of Laskaya and Salisbury's dating, Allison Wiggins on the National Library of Scotland's website dedicated to the Auchinleck Manuscript confirms that "Palaeography, style of illumination and internal references indicate that Auchinleck was most likely to have been produced between 1331 and 1340 but the identity of the earliest readers and owners remains unknown."[35] Additionally, Wiggins notes that: "Dialect and the apparently commercial and collaborative nature of this manuscript's production, imply that it was most likely to have been produced in London."[36]

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[32]Gail Ashton. Medieval English Romance in Context. 39.
[33]Ibid., 39-40.
[34]Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. The Middle English Breton Lays. "Sir Orfeo: Introduction".
[35]As the National Library of Scotland's website for the Auchinleck MS does not have page numbers; in order to reference quotations I will give the subheadings under which they can be found. Allison Wiggins. https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/history.html "The Earliest Owners and Readers of the Auchinleck"
[36]Ibid., "The Earliest Owners and Readers of the Auchinleck"

Besides the manuscript's likely production in fourteenth century London, Ralph Hanna argues that it is composed of twelve booklets that were likely produced separately.[37] The separate production of these booklets might mean that the order the manuscript is now found in was not how it was intended at the time of production. Yet, Hanna also discusses that the works were "certainly preserved in an intended order, fixed by the consecutively numbered texts, and imposed by scribe I at the end of the work."[38] Most scholars have generally agreed that out of the 5 to 6 scribes, (whether it was 5 or 6 scribes is still somewhat under discussion[39]) scribe 1 functioned as the main copyist, being responsible for copying about 70 percent of the surviving work.[40] Similarly, Timothy A. Shonk argues that scribe 1 would have been responsible for organizing the order of the manuscript, noting that: "[Scribe 1] copied most of the material himself, famed out other pieces to independent scribes, and then completed the work needed to put the book into its final form."[41] This means that the manuscript would have been ordered deliberately according to scribe 1's wishes, suggesting that its order. Furthermore, this deliberate order warrants an examination of where the Breton lays were placed within the order of the manuscript. Moreover, the production of the manuscript in the form of separate booklets means that the combinations of texts in those booklets were likely matched for a reason. As such looking at the texts combined within those booklets may provide insights into how they might have been read and received.

The Auchinleck MS is one of the few surviving Middle English manuscripts of its size, containing predominantly Middle English texts. Indeed, the manuscript's size is especially remarkable due to its contents being almost solely written in Middle English, which was not common among other manuscripts of its time. According to Laura Hibbard Loomis those people that did have an extensive collection of manuscripts in their libraries before 1360 were not known to have many, if any, works in English grace their shelves.[42] Rather, Loomis notes that "with the rare exception of a religious or didactic work in English, such collectors were concerned with the acquisition of books written in Latin or French."[43] Therefore, for such an extensive manuscript to exist almost fully composed of English texts would have, even then,

[37]Ralph Hanna. "Reading Romance in London: The Auchinleck Manuscript and Laud Misc. 622." In London Literature, 1300–1380. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 104.
[38]Ralph Hanna. "Reading Romance in London." 104.
[39]Ralph Hanna reports that Robinson (1972) "indicates that one ten-leaf booklet always assigned to a 'scribe 6' was in fact copied by 'scribe 1'." Ralph Hanna. "Reconsidering the Auchinleck Manuscript" 92.
[40]Allison Wiggins. https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/physical.html. "Scribes".
[41]Timothy A. Shonk. "A Study of the Auchinleck Manuscript: Bookmen and Bookmaking in the Early Fourteenth Century." *Speculum 60*, no. 1 (1985): 73.
[42]Laura Hibbard Loomis. "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340." *PMLA 57*, no. 3 (1942): 600.
[43]*Ibid.,* 600.

been rather unique. In fact, the manuscript is even further extraordinary in that according to Loomis, it contains almost every type of English verse,[44] ranging from secular to religious poetry.

The manuscript's versatility is also what makes it difficult to pinpoint for who it might have been produced. The inclusion of many religious texts might suggest that it was meant for those of the clerical profession. However, considering that the manuscript is also famous for being home to many romances, an audience of nobility and laymen would not be improbable either. Another option is that the manuscript might have been used by a minstrel, whose audiences would have ranged from nobles to other laymen. Yet, this is also unlikely according to Loomis as, "Given what we know now about the prevailingly high cost of books, especially of illustrated books in the fourteenth century, no poor devil of a minstrel, it seems probable, could have afforded to buy tis rather large quarto which was once extensively illustrated."[45] As such, the Auchinleck Manuscript's size suggests that it was not simply an array of randomly arranged texts; its costs would have required the patronage of someone with a particular goal for the manuscript.

Robert Allen Rouse has argued for a deliberate compilation of the Auchinleck Manuscript. With the manuscript's Englishness forming the basis of his arguments, Rouse seems to argue for an idea that the manuscript was compiled by its producers with an almost nationalistic purpose in mind. Upon examining the work of other scholars he finds that: "The Auchinleck manuscript, comprised as it is of regional romances that have been co-opted for a national and cosmopolitan audience, stands as a complex manifestation of Englishness.[46] Rouse, reporting the views of Thorlac Turville-Petre writes that, "the manuscript's narrative of England, written in English, 'does not simply recognize a social need but is an expression of the very character of the manuscript, of its passion for England and its pride in being English'."[47] Therefore, it seems that for Rouse the inherent 'Englishness' of the manuscript reflects an idea of English nationalism, and as such he appears to be an advocate for a deliberate compilation of the Auchinleck MS. The compilers of the manuscript would not likely have thrown together random texts but chosen specific English works that would support a pride in English identity and history. Moreover, this might be even more telling of what audiences

[44]Laura Hibbard Loomis. "Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck MS." Studies in Philology 38, no. 1 (1941): 14.
[45]Laura Hibbard Loomis. "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop." 599.
[46]Robert Allen Rouse. "The Romance of English Identity." In *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*. Boydell & Brewer, 2005. 74.
[47]Thorlac Turville-Petre 1996, 112. in Robert Allen Rouse. "The Romance of English Identity." 74.

would have expected of the Breton lays, namely sources in which they could confirm their English identity.

Similar to Ralph Hanna, Allison Wiggins confirms that the manuscript was made in fascicles which are groups of continuously copied quires that can be divided into different booklets. Moreover, Wiggins suggests that the Auchinleck consisted of ten of these booklets rather than the twelve Hanna suggests.[48] Furthermore, Wiggins, reporting the views of Mordkoff, has also argued that each fascicle can be characterized by a specific theme.[49] This is another example that strengthens the argument on the manuscript's deliberate composition and that it does not simply consist of some haphazard collection of texts. Rather, the thematic composition of each booklet would have meant that they were placed together with a particular goal in mind. For instance, a booklet might contain only romance texts that focus mainly on the theme of love and therefore the booklet would likely have been composed like that in order to explore that particular theme. Additionally, a booklet might have consisted of different kinds of texts but still be focused on portraying some set of morals when they are all examined together. A romance text might not portray moral lessons on its own but when paired with a religious text that treats a similar subject, together they could teach a lesson about, say, the dangers of infidelity. Therefore, not only can the composition of such booklets tell us about the deliberate composition of a manuscript's texts, a manuscript's composition could also be vital for exploring the different texts separately and discovering what expectations medieval audiences would have had for them, be that Breton lay or Saint's life.

Aside from the assembly of the booklets, the extant manuscript consists of 331 folios and 14 stubs, with an additional 10 folios having been discovered separate from the manuscript. The manuscript contains a total of 43 surviving texts and, as indicated by the item numbering, circa 17 items have been lost.[50] The following is a list of the Auchinleck Manuscript's full content, as indicated on the National Library of Scotland's website:[51]

In Manuscript Order
The Legend of Pope Gregory (ff.1r-6v)
f.6Ar / f.6Av (thin stub)
The King of Tars (ff.7ra-13vb)
The Life of Adam and Eve (E ff.1ra-2vb; ff.14ra-16rb)
Seynt Mergrete (ff.16rb-21ra)
Seynt Katerine (ff.21ra-24vb)
St Patrick's Purgatory (ff.25ra-31vb)

[48]Allison Wiggins. https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/physical.html. "Foliation and collation"
[49]*Ibid.,* "Folliation and collation".
[50]*Ibid.,* "Damage, condition and losses".
[51]*Ibid.,* https://auchinleck.nls.uk/contents.html "Contents".

þe Desputisoun Bitven þe Bodi and þe Soule (ff.31vb-35ra stub)
The Harrowing of Hell (ff.35rb-37rb or 37va stub)
The Clerk who would see the Virgin (ff.37rb or 37va stub-38vb)
Speculum Gy de Warewyke (ff.39ra-48rb stub)
Amis and Amiloun (ff.48rb stub-61va stub)
The Life of St Mary Magdalene (ff.61Ava stub-65vb)
The Nativity and Early Life of Mary (ff.65vb-69va)
On the Seven Deadly Sins (ff.70ra-72ra)
The Paternoster (ff.72ra-72rb or 72va stub)
The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin (72rb or 72va stub-78ra)
Sir Degare (ff.78rb-84rb stub)
The Seven Sages of Rome (ff.84rb stub-99vb)
Gathering missing (c1400 lines of text)
Floris and Blancheflour (ff.100ra-104vb)
The Sayings of the Four Philosophers (ff.105ra-105rb)
The Battle Abbey Roll (ff.105v-107r)
f.107Ar / f.107Av (thin stub)
Guy of Warwick (couplets) (ff.108ra-146vb)
Guy of Warwick (stanzas) (ff.145vb-167rb)
Reinbroun (ff.167rb-175vb)
leaf missing.
Sir Beues of Hamtoun (ff.176ra-201ra)
Of Arthour & of Merlin (ff.201rb-256vb)
þe Wenche þat Loved þe King (ff.256vb-256A thin stub)
A Peniworþ of Witt (ff.256A stub-259rb)
How Our Lady's Sauter was First Found (ff.259rb-260vb)
Lay le Freine (ff.261ra-262A thin stub)
Roland and Vernagu (ff.262va stub-267vb)
Otuel a Knight (ff.268ra-277vb)
Many leaves lost, but some recovered as fragments.
Kyng Alisaunder (L f.1ra-vb; S A.15 f.1ra-2vb; L f.2ra-vb; ff.278-9)
The Thrush and the Nightingale (ff.279va-vb)
The Sayings of St Bernard (f.280ra)
Dauid þe King (ff.280rb-280vb)
Sir Tristrem (ff.281ra-299A thin stub)
Sir Orfeo (ff.299A stub-303ra)
The Four Foes of Mankind (f.303rb-303vb)
The Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle (ff.304ra-317rb)
Horn Childe & Maiden Rimnild (ff.317va-323vb)
leaf missing.
Alphabetical Praise of Women (ff.324ra-325vb)
King Richard (f.326; E f.3ra-vb; S R.4 f.1ra-2vb; E f.4ra-vb; f.327)
Many leaves lost.
þe Simonie (ff.328r-334v)

The full list of texts illustrates how extensive the Auchinleck Manuscript is, and how large it might have been when it was fully intact with all its texts still in place. Although the manuscript contains an array of texts, Wiggins has noted that it is "most famous for its collection of verse romances. Of Auchinleck's 44 surviving texts, 18 are romances; 8 of these are in unique versions and all are in their earliest copy, with the one exception of Floris and Blancheflour."[52] Considering that Breton lays have often been grouped under the general category of Romance, it is no surprise that the Auchinleck MS contains three of the existing Middle English Breton lays. Indeed, *Lay le Freine* is one of the aforementioned unique versions of texts that the manuscript holds. The other two Breton lays featured in the Auchinleck MS are *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degare*. Each of these texts is surrounded by other texts listed in the manuscript, and would likely have been together in a fascicle with those texts.

The current chapter has given a brief history of the Auchinleck MS and shown why it should prove beneficial to review its three Breton lays within context. Therefore the focus of the next chapter will lie with examining the texts surrounding the lays. These texts might be of assistance in determining audiences' expectations for Breton lays. By looking at the list in manuscript order, the following can be noted: *Sir Degare* is preceded by *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin* and followed by *The Seven Sages of Rome*, *Lay le Freine* is preceded by *How Our Lady's Sauter was First Found* and followed by *Roland and Vernagu* and, *Sir Orfeo* is preceded by *Sir Tristrem* and followed by *The Four Foes of Mankind.* The next order of business then, is to examine these texts that precede and follow the lays and determine what insights they can offer for determining medieval audiences' expectations for Breton lays.

[52]Allison Wiggins. https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/importance.html "The Auchinleck Manuscript and English Literature".

CHAPTER 3: THE BRETON LAYS OF THE AUCHINLECK MANUSCRIPT IN CONTEXT

Having established a brief history of the Auchinleck MS and why it may prove beneficial to review its three Breton lays within their manuscript context, the focus of the current chapter will lie with examining the texts surrounding the lays. These texts might be of assistance in determining audiences' expectations for Breton lays. By looking at the list in manuscript order, the following can be noted: *Sir Degare* is preceded by *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin* and followed by *The Seven Sages of Rome*, *Lay le Freine* is preceded by *How Our Lady's Sauter was First Found* and followed by *Roland and Vernagu* and, *Sir Orfeo* is preceded by *Sir Tristrem* and followed by *The Four Foes of Mankind.* The next order of business then, is to examine these texts that precede and follow the lays and determine how they help in determining medieval audiences' expectations for Breton lays. The following section will note the texts that surround the Breton lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript, and, where possible, will give some brief information on them.[53] Each of the lays will be summarized concisely and the resulting summaries will be followed by examinations of the texts surrounding the lays.

A discussion of the Auchinleck's texts

Sir Degare is the first Breton lay that a reader would come across in the Auchinleck MS if the manuscript were read in order and so this section will start with a discussion of the texts surrounding that particular work. As noted before, *Sir Degare* is preceded by the text *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin* and followed by *The Seven Sages of Rome*. The titles of these texts already indicate that they are likely very different from the Breton lay in their midst.

To start off a comparison between *Sir Degare* and its surrounding texts, a concise summary of the lay itself should be useful. *Sir Degare* revolves around Degare, the illegitimate son of a princess of Brittany and a fairy knight. Degare is left by his mother and raised by a merchant's wife. The only things left to him by his mother were a pair of magic gloves that fit only her and a letter. As Degare becomes older he goes on a quest to find his family. His quest takes him on adventures that involve fighting a dragon and becoming a knight. As Degare travels he hears of a princess (his mother) whose hand in marriage can be won only if he defeats her father the king in battle. Degare manages to defeat the king and is immediately married to

[53] Although the Auchinleck MS as a whole has been thoroughly researched, not every text inside it has received the same treatment. Therefore, where good separate scholarly research on a text cannot be accessed I will rely on the Auchinleck MS webpage by the National Library of Scotland to give some brief information.

the princess, who happens to be his mother. As the couple are about to go to bed Degare remembers the magic gloves and both he and the princess realise that they are in fact mother and son. As the lay nears its end Degare goes to look for his father. When Degare comes upon a mysterious castle he falls in love with its lady. The lady, Degare finds out, has a suitor who is trying to abduct her and has killed all her father's men, she promises to marry Degare if he can defeat her suitor. In the end, the suitor turns out to be Degare's fairy father and Degare brings him back to his mother. Degare's mother divorces her son and marries his father, and Degare and the lady are also married.

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is first and foremost a religious text. Wiggins groups the text under the heading 'The saints' lives and legends' and notes that this is one of the texts that is unique to the Auchinleck MS, meaning that it could be a text that only survives in the Auchinleck MS or that this is a specific version of the text only found in the manuscript.[54] Saints' lives texts like *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin*, describe the life and veneration of Christian saints. The stories often involve biographies of saintly people, accounts of their trials and deaths, and the miracles connected to them, their tombs, relics, icons, or statues.[55] In the case of this particular text, the venerated saint would be the Virgin Mary, as she is often described by names such as the Blessed Virgin.

The Seven Sages of Rome is, in turn, a completely different kind of text from the Saint's life: *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin*. In short, the story of *The Seven Sages of Rome* revolves around a young prince who is accused of a crime by his stepmother but rendered mute by her due to which he is unable to defend himself. The boy is condemned to death and on the seven nights before his execution the stepmother tries to convince the Emperor that he is guilty. However, every morning the sages, the boy's tutors, tell their own stories that show the danger in trusting a woman. Due to this the emperor constantly changes his mind and the sages' stories manage to delay the execution by seven days, on the eighth day the young prince proclaims his innocence and is deemed guilt-free, while the stepmother is executed. According to Piero Boitani *The Seven Sages of Rome* is an early example of a frame-tale that was oriental of origin and classified as a metrical romance.[56] Boitani has some interesting thoughts on the purpose of the poem: "From the point of view of cultural history, the most important feature of these stories is that while they are *exempla*, the morality that they represent is entirely secular.[57] Indeed, *The*

[54]Allison Wiggins. https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/importance.html "The Auchinleck Manuscript and English Literature".
[55] Britannica Academic, s.v. "Hagiography," https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/levels/collegiate/article/hagiography/38783.
[56] Piero Boitani. *English Medieval Narrative in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries.* Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 116.
[57]Piero Boitani. *English Medieval Narrative in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. 116.

Seven Sages of Rome is more focused on teaching secular morals whereas many of the Auchinleck's other texts are focused on conveying religious morals. Additionally, the secular purpose of the text might have more connection to the Middle English lay it follows and could be insightful as to what Middle English audiences might have expected from these two texts in such close proximity to one another.

Lay le Freine is a Middle English version of Marie de France's lay *Le Fresne*. As previously mentioned, Wiggins notes that *Lay le Freine* is one of the texts that is unique to the Auchinleck MS.[58] The uniqueness that Wiggins notes is found in the fact that this Middle English version of *Lay le Freine* is not found anywhere other than in the Auchinleck MS. In the manuscript, *Lay le Freine* is preceded by *How Our Lady's Sauter was First Found* and followed by *Roland and Vernagu*. I will first give a brief summary of *Lay le Freine*'s narrative as it will help in comparing it to its surrounding texts and their narratives.

Lay le Freine, is centered around the young and beautiful Le Freine. The narrative begins with the introduction of two knights. One of the knights's wives gives birth to twins and is condemned by the other knight's wife as having twins is supposed to prove that the woman has slept with two different men. Unfortunately, the woman who was so quick to condemn the other woman then gives birth to her own set of twins. Ashamed she decides to place one of the girls in an ash tree outside a convent, leaving her with only an embroidered cloth and a ring. The girl is found by a nun and named Le Freine.

As Le Freine matures, news of her beauty spreads and a knight called Sir Guroun falls in love with her and convinces her to elope with him. The knight and Le Freine live together as husband and wife but never marry, Guroun's fellow knights do not agree with this and demand that he marry a knight's daughter to produce an heir. Unbeknownst to them the knights suggest Le Freine's sister Le coudre. Everyone gathers for the wedding and in her humbleness Le Freine decorates the marriage bed with her embroidered cloth. Le Freine's mother figures out that Le Freine is the daughter she abandoned and takes her back with open arms. Sir Guroun's marriage with Le Freine's sister is then undone and Le Freine and Sir Guroun are married.

Lay le Freine is preceded by *How Our Lady's Sauter was First Found* in the Auchinleck manuscript. Although not much research has been done on this particular text it is a familiar type of text— a religious one. From the title of the poem it is clear that the text is concerned with the Virgin Mary. Moreover the *Middle English Dictionary*'s definitions for the sauter provide some enlightenment as to the contents of this particular poem. Namely, entry 1f for the

[58]Allison Wiggins. https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/importance.html. "The Auchinleck Manuscript and English Literature".

term ‘sauter’ reads as follows: “oure ladies sauter, the set of prayers recited upon a rosary, so called because the fifteen decades of Aves correspond to the hundred and fifty psalms of the psalter.”[59] Without having spent much time on translating the text, the text seems to be concerned with how Mary established the psalter, which according to the *MED* are the prayers that would be recited upon the rosary.

Lay le Freine is followed by *Roland and Vernagu* in the manuscript. This particluar text is one of the many romances that the Auchinleck MS is known for and is also unique to it.[60] According to H. M. Smyser, *Roland and Vernagu* is part of a “composite Middle English tail-rhyme romance which has come down to us broken in two.”[61] The *Roland and Vernagu* text in the Auchinleck MS is only one of these two parts. Smyser also states that the narrative of *Roland and Vernagu* begins the story of Charlemagne’s conquest of Spain. The poem is said to end at the point when half of Charlemagne’s victories in Spain have been recounted and the audience has just been told of the slaying of the Saracen giant Vernagu.[62] While the narrative of *Roland and Vernagu* seems to base its story in reality with the appearance of Charlemagne and his conquests, the presence of the giant Vernagu also clearly gives the poem an otherworldly character. Additionally, although it may not seem like it at first, the poem also has distinctly religious features. According to Laura Hibbard Loomis, the text is concerned with “relics of Christ’s Passion and certain other holy objects.”[63] Indeed, Loomis notes how, when in Constantinople, Charlemagne was described to only want relics of the saviour as gifts.[64] Therefore, even though *Lay le Freine* is seemingly surrounded by one religious text and one secular text, the secular text also exhibits religious features.

Sir Orfeo is a retelling of the ancient Orpheus myth and recounts the story of an English king called Orfeo. The narrative follows king Orfeo as his wife Heurodis is abducted to the land of fairy. Orfeo then believes he can no longer govern his lands properly and appoints a steward to rule in his stead. After appointing the steward, Orfeo goes into a self-imposed exile. Orfeo goes out into the wilds bringing only his beloved harp. After living at least ten years in exile, Orfeo encounters a group of fairy people in the forest and sees his wife, Heurodis, among them. As Orfeo follows this host, he ends up in the land of fairy. Once there, Orfeo sees many people believed dead in the human world and among them he sees Heurodis. Orfeo is rebuked by the

[59] *Middle English Dictionary.* s.v. “sauter.” https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED38623/track?counter=1&search_id=4763820
[60] Allison Wiggins. https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/importance.html “The Auchinleck Manuscript and English Literature”.
[61] H. M. Smyser. "Charlemagne and Roland and the Auchinleck MS." *Speculum* 21, no. 3 (1946): 275.
[62] *Ibid.,* 275.
[63] Laura Hibbard Loomis. "The Auchinleck Roland and Vernagu and the Short Chronicle." *Modern Language Notes* 60, no. 2 (1945): 94.
[64] *Ibid.,* 94.

fairy king for having entered his castle without being summoned, but Sir Orfeo manages to entertain the fairy king by playing music on his harp. Because Orfeo plays the harp so beautifully the fairy king says that Orfeo can have a reward of his choosing, Orfeo chooses Heurodis. He is allowed to take back Heurodis and returns to Winchester with her.

In Winchester, Orfeo is not recognized because he has dressed in the clothes of a beggar. However, he is invited into the palace by the steward because of his musical ability. Once in the palace, the steward recognizes the harp as belonging to king Orfeo. Orfeo then says that he found the harp next to a mutilated body many years ago and the steward, upon hearing this, faints in misery and grief, believing the body to have been king Orfeo's. After this display of grief, Orfeo reveals himself to be the true king, stating that he had been testing the loyalty of the steward. If the steward had been pleased to hear of Orfeo's death, he would have been banished from his lands. However, all is well now and Orfeo has Heurodis brought to the castle, from the place that he had left her before heading there. Thus, the story ends with Orfeo and Heurodis resuming their roles as king and queen and the steward becoming the heir to the throne thanks to his loyalty to Sir Orfeo.

Sir Orfeo is preceded by *Sir Tristrem* in the Auchinleck Manuscript. *Sir Tristrem* is one of the unique texts found in the Auchinleck Manuscript.[65] According to Ad Putter et al. the poem was based on the Anglo-Norman *Tristan* and is the only Middle English witness to the Tristan legend before Sir Thomas Malory's.[66] Putter et al. also note that "while only one copy of the romance survives -in the famous Auchinleck manuscript, it was evidently well-known at the time, for there are allusions to it in a number of ME works."[67] Therefore, if *Sir Tristrem* was likely well-known to medieval audiences than its closeness to *Sir Orfeo* in the Auchinleck MS might telling of the latter text's reception as well.

The narrative of *Sir Tristrem* is another telling of the story of Tristan and Isolt which, according to Alan Lupack, was "one of the most popular tales of the Middle Ages, [and] has its roots in early Celtic literature and legend."[68] Like *Sir Orfeo* then, *Sir Tristrem*'s narrative is derived from a far older legend. Moreover, their common origin in older legends would be one clear way to explain their pairing in the manuscript. The story of *Sir Tristrem*, follows the knight Tristrem on his many adventures; yet, the narrative is essentially focused around the adulterous love of Sir Tristrem, and the princess Isolt who is married to King Mark. Lupack argues that

[65]Allison Wiggins. https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/importance.html "The Auchinleck Manuscript and English Literature"
[66]Ad Putter, Judith Anne Jefferson, and Donka Minkova. "Dialect, Rhyme, and Emendation in Sir Tristrem." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 113, no. 1 (2014), 73.
[67]*Ibid.,* 73.
[68]Alan Lupack. "*Sir Tristrem*: Introduction." In *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem.* Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994.

many scholars have deemed the poem a simple or cheap English version of the original legend.[69] Furthermore, Lupack notes that "the author of Sir Tristrem does seem to expect his audience to know the story as well as some of the conventions of romance. It is precisely this knowledge that makes effective the parody of romance conventions which runs throughout the poem."[70] If the author of *Sir Tristrem* indeed expected his audiences to have knowledge of romance conventions this would arguably mean that audiences would have been familiar with the conventions of other kinds of romance texts in the manuscript as well, like *Sir Orfeo* or the other lays. Furthermore, if Lupack is right about *Sir Tristrem* being a parody of romance then this in turn could have implications for its pairing with *Sir Orfeo*.

Sir Orfeo is followed by *The Four Foes of Mankind*. This particular poem is another one of the texts that is unique to the Auchinleck MS and belongs to the group of moral texts that grace the manuscript's pages. However, not a lot of research has been done on the narrative of this rather short poem. Constance Bullock describes the text as a "vigorous little poem" that "has been printed only thrice within the last ninety years."[71] The scholars that have researched the poem have focused primarily on its linguistic aspects. Yet, Leo Carruthers briefly touches upon the poem's genre: "It belongs to the genre of philosophical reflections and religious warnings about the dangers of the World, the Devil and the Flesh, to which is added a fourth enemy, Death."[72] The morality of the text then lies in its religious preaching, and according to Bullock "the theme was very much favoured by medieval writers, particularly the clerics."[73] The strong sense of morality portrayed in this poem that follows *Sir Orfeo* seems to note something rather interesting about the manuscript compiler's intended purpose for the lay. Namely, that *Sir Orfeo* may not be a lay meant for simple entertainment but rather that it also serves as a text which offers moral lessons to its reader.

Conclusions on the Auchinleck's texts in connection to its Breton lays

As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, while there is textual research that can be done on the manuscript and Middle English texts, the written evidence is quite limited. Most of the conclusions that will now be drawn have to be based off assumptions as there is no physical evidence as to what connections the compilers of the Auchinleck Manuscript would have seen

[69]Alan Lupack. "*Sir Tristrem*: Introduction." Final paragraphs.
[70]*Ibid.,* Final paragraphs.
[71]Constance Bullock. "The Enemies of Man." The Review of English Studies Os-V, no. 18 (1929), 186.
[72]Leo Carruthers. "*The Four Foes of* Mankind: Modern English version and notes by Leo Carruthers." Paris-Sorbonne University, (2020), 1. https://lettres.sorbonne-universite.fr/sites/default/files/media/2020-01/four_foes_of_mankind_introduction.pdf.
[73]Constance Bullock. "The Enemies of Man." 186.

between the different texts in the manuscript. Be that as it may, the following section will attempt to conclude what some of the combinations of texts can mean for the expectations that medieval audiences might have had for the Breton lays.

Firstly, the Breton lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript are surrounded by both secular and religious texts. While the manuscript's producers could have chosen to combine all of the secular romances and all the religious texts, they seem to have specifically chosen to also include religious texts in the combinations. Indeed, it is the presence of the religious texts in close proximity to the lays that might be telling of what the expectations for such the lays would have been. Arguably, most of the religious texts bring with them some sort of moral or life lesson and as such it could be possible that similar lessons were expected to be found in the lays that were paired with them.

Sir Degaré is preceded by a religious texts and followed by a secular text. While secular and religious texts may seem utterly contrastive, in this case the texts share a similar theme that connects them. Namely, both of the texts, in a way, discuss women. It could be argued that *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin* preceeds *Sir Degaré* in order to first establish an example of what a good godly woman would have looked like, since it discusses the Virgin Mary who is about as good as it gets from a Christian viewpoint. After which *Sir Degaré* shows a quite different woman, namely Sir Degaré's mother, a princes of Brittany who has a child out of wedlock that she gives away in order to keep it a secret. This in turn is followed, in a rather clever way, by *The Seven Sages of Rome*—a text that, as has been previously discovered, warns about the dangers of trusting women. Although, *The Seven Sages of Rome* focuses on different stories about why trusting women is dangerous, it could easily be connected to the narrative of *Sir Degaré.* That is to say, the fact that Sir Degaré's mother keeps the child that she has gotten out of wedlock a secret is what causes some rather disturbing things to happen in the narrative. To be specific, Sir Degaré who is out to find glory and is unaware of the identity of his mother, ends up competing for her hand in marriage and winning it. This results in Degaré and his mother almost consummating their marriage and being seconds away from committing incest before Degaré's mother figures out that he is her son.

It would make sense then that *The Seven Sages of Rome* should follow this lay in order to warn audiences about trusting women as the king of Brittany trusted his daughter and Sir Degaré trusted his newly wedded wife. Moreover, in a way, this emphasis on the danger the princess created by giving away her baby without telling anyone about it also shows a lesson that the lay itself is trying to portray. Namely that, had she not given away the baby, that situation could have been entirely avoided. This focus on giving up a baby and the problems

that might ensue is also a theme that comes back in one of the other lays, as will be shown further on.

As has been shown, *Lay le Freine,* like the two other lays, is preceded and followed by both a religious and secular text. The pairing of *Lay le Freine* with *How Our Lady's Sauter was First Found* seems to be mostly unrelated besides the fact that it shows how the Breton lays were apparently fit to be paired with religious texts. The one thing that may connect the actual narratives of the two texts is the fact that Le Freine is described as a humble and kind woman. Therefore, *Lay le Freine* might have been paired with a text on the Virgin Mary to give another example of a good woman like Mary was. The most important factor of this pairing remains the fact that it shows a Breton lay paired with a religious text, which might give way to the notion that the compiler was trying to attribute a more didactic rather than entertaining purpose to the lay.

Moreover, it is worth noting the connection that *Lay le Freine* has to *Sir Degaré,* which is featured earlier on in the manuscript. Their connection is found in the fact that both lays treat the subject of an infant being kept a secret and given away by its mother. In both cases, the infant is raised elsewhere and unaware of their true identity, which ends up drastically changing the narrative further on. As such, both *Sir Degaré* and *Lay le Freine*, seem to be teaching their audiences that there is no benefit to giving up a baby, rather it could even cause issues later on in life. Therefore, this particular example shows how the Breton lays may have served as texts that teach moral lessons to their audiences .

The pairing of *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Tristrem* does not have the religious connection that some of the other combinations have but it does show something else. Keeping in mind the pairing of *Lay le Freine* and *Roland and Vernagu*, the manuscript compilation here seems to show that the Breton lays were also well suited to circulating with other lays. Rather than limiting themselves to combinations of Breton lays with religious texts or other Breton lays, the compilers of the Auchinleck MS also paired Breton lays with other lays that did not necessarily have any connection to them.

Furthermore*, Sir Orfeo* and *The Four Foes of Mankind* is another example of a seemingly deliberate pairing by the manuscript's compilers. Indeed, *The Four Foes of Mankind* is clearly a text that is focused on morals and teaching its audience a lesson. Although the text's message is highly religious, the emphasis on morals does in a way connect it to *Sir Orfeo*. While *Sir Orfeo* is a text that seems to be wholly concerned with faeries and the woes of love, it also portrays some valuable lessons that might have appealed to the audience of *The Four Foes of Mankind* as well. One of the clearest lessons stemming from the narrative of *Sir Orfeo* is the

importance of trust and loyalty; this lesson is clear when Orfeo rewards his steward for remaining true even when the steward believed Orfeo was dead. This lesson might be connected to *The Four Foes of Mankind* in the sense that the aforementioned text is centred around warnings about the dangers of the world. As such, it may be argued that *The Four Foes of Mankind* is a warning away from those things that might have caused the ending of *Sir Orfeo* to evolve quite differently. If Orfeo or his steward had been seduced by the dangers of the world, riches, power et cetera, then the lay might not have ended on such a cheery note. *Sir Orfeo's* pairing with *The Four Foes of Mankind* seems to ensure that the didactic purpose of the former is particularly strengthened. This pairing in particular can strengthen the argument that the Middle English Breton lays might have served as texts that offer a lesson. Correspondingly, medieval audiences conceivably could have expected to find some sort of life lesson within the Breton lays.

The conclusions drawn above show that the compiler of the Auchinleck Manuscript could indeed have had a specific purpose in mind while combining the lays with religious texts. Most of the combinations of lays and religious texts above show that the inclusion of the densely didactic religious texts ensured that the lays could be read with a similar didactic purpose as the religious texts. Initially, when reading the Breton lays, audiences might have considered them to be meant for mere entertainment purposes, but when paired with such texts as *The Four Foes of Mankind* or even *The Seven Sages of Rome*, the texts show their own potential for being read with as didactic. In this sense, Auchinleck's compiler could have been trying to assign the Breton lays greater didactic force by combining them with these didactic texts, whether they taught religious morals as in *The Four Foes of Mankind* or secular morals as in *The Seven Sages of Rome.* Therefore, the analysis of the lays within the context of the medieval Auchinleck Manuscript, shows that they might have been read for more than just entertainment purposes. Medieval audiences may have read the Middle English Breton lays to learn moral lessons from them.

CHAPTER 4 – THE MIDDLE ENGLISH BRETON LAYS AND THEIR AUDIENCES

This thesis will focus on the three Breton lays that can be found within the Auchinleck Manuscript. Although there are quite a few more texts that scholars have identified as Breton lays, the previous chapters have made clear why the three Breton lays of the Auchinleck MS are of particular interest for the current research. Those three lays include: *Lay le Freine, Sir Degaré,* and *Sir Orfeo*. These works have been specifically chosen due to their presence in the Auchinleck Manuscript. As such, it is important to closely analyse the three lays and attempt to establish what aspects of the poems would have made them identifiable as Breton lays to medieval audiences. Furthermore, it should also be worth briefly examining the audiences as they are described by the lays. As the identity of audiences would be inexorably linked with their expectations for literary works, it should prove fruitful to examine what those audiences might have looked like.

Therefore, this chapter will explore one key idea: I will take a closer look at, and analyse, each of the three aforementioned Breton lays in order to establish an idea of what audiences' expectations might have been, with respect to the characteristics that the lays show. Finally, from the research done in the aforementioned sections, I will attempt to partially reconstruct an image of medieval audiences' expectations for Breton lays. Firstly though, I will attempt to briefly examine the identity of the medieval audiences through some of the beginning lines of the Middle English Breton lays under discussion.

While the next section of this chapter will be focused on analysing the lines of the three Breton lays of the Auchinleck manuscript, some of the initial lines of the lays provide an interesting insight into the audiences' identity. Rather than directing the poems' introduction at laymen the poets of *Lay le Freine, Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré* seemingly address only lords and ladies. Namely, in the prologue of *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* the poet states: "Ac herkneth, lordinges ben trewe, [But listen, lords that are loyal]"[74] in doing so, the poet is evidently addressing the aristocracy. The previous example is similar to the introduction of *Sir Degaré* where the poet begins his narrative by addressing lords: "Lysteneth, lordinges, gente and fre," [Listen, gentle and noble lords][75]. These lines evidently address the aristocracy, which suggests that this group might have been the lay's intended audience. Since lords are specifically mentioned in the poets' address I would argue that the poems at least envision their audiences

[74] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Orfeo.*" in *The Middle English Breton Lays.* Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995. l. 23.
[75] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Degaré.*" in *The Middle English Breton Lays.* Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995. l. 1.

as including the aristocracy. However, while this passage could suggest that the lays were enjoyed by the aristocracy, it does not necessarily exclude audiences of laymen. Moreover, Krista Murchison, drawing on the work on audience by Walter Ong, notes that, "Literary studies, as a field, has come to accept that textually constructed audiences—both the intended and implied audiences of a text—are not a record of actual readers in any straightforward way, but an authorial projection."[76] So while the lines from the Auchinleck's three Breton lays could indeed mean that the lays were enjoyed by an aristocrat audience, we must keep in mind that a poet's intended audience does not necessarily tell us what the actual audiences looked like.

An analysis of the Breton lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript

This section will focus on analyzing the Breton lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript. These are: *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Degaré*. In the following section I will attempt to establish what characteristics and themes are apparent in all three of the lays and how these might have been received by contemporary medieval audiences. For the analysis of the lays I will primarily use the editions provided by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, all translations to modern English will be constructed by myself with the use of Laskaya and Salisbury's glosses provided with the editions. Moreover, I have specifically chosen to primarily focus on the prologues to all three of the Middle English Breton lays of the Auchinleck manuscript since they will provide a specific range of lines in which to find similarities. I chose this method of analysis in order to ensure that the arguments surrounding the similarities between the three texts would be approached systematically, rather than drawn arbitrarily from wholly different sections of the poems in order to fit my own arguments. The focus on the prologues should ensure that any audience expectations that I find will be based within a small range of lines rather than arbitrary examples found from hundreds of different lines.

The first and foremost characteristic of the Breton lays, and one that has been identified by many scholars, is the establishment of the narrative's origin in the Breton tradition in the introduction to the poem. All three of the lays make sure to mention that their narrative either takes place or was somehow founded in Brittany. *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*'s first 12 lines are completely identical. However, according to Lucien Foulet, this is due to one of them copying the prologue of the other, with *Sir Orfeo'*s prologue in Foulet's mind likely being the

[76]Murchison, Krista. "Is the Audience Dead too? Textually Constructed Audiences and Differentiated Learning in Medieval England." *Modern Language Review.* Vol. 115 (2020): 497.

original.[77] Interestingly, the version of *Sir Orfeo* found in the Auchinleck Manuscript is in fact missing most of its prologue lines. Despite this, I have chosen to count the intro lines from the edition by Laskaya and Salisbury anyway, since they make a good argument for why the lines should be examined as part of the original text. In the notes to their edition of *Lay le Freine*, Laskaya and Salisbury state that the prologue lines of *Lay le Freine* can also be found in both of the fifteenth century manuscripts of *Sir Orfeo*. Evidently, this statement supports the idea that the prologue of *Lay le Freine* was also used for *Sir Orfeo* originally. Moreover, Laskaya and Salisbury note that Gabrielle Guillaume, like Foulet, finds that the prologues of *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo* seem closely intertwined. Interestingly, in an argument opposing Foulet's findings Guillaume notes that *Lay le Freine* was the original text that contained this particular prologue.[78] In that sense, Guillaume argues that the Middle English poet of *Sir Orfeo* would have borrowed the lines for his text and that his version of the prologue was the copy.[79] Regardless of whether the prologue was first added to *Sir* Orfeo or *Lay le Freine,* the evidence presented here indicates that there is value in considering the prologue used by Laskaya and Salisbury as part of *Sir Orfeo*.[80] As such, I will use it in my analysis of the three Breton lays of the Auchinleck MS.

While the identical prologue of the two lays is very interesting it does not necessarily have any consequences for the establishment of the Breton origins of the lays. Indeed, there are differences in the ways in which the lays announce their origins in Brittany. *Sir Orfeo* grounds its composition in Brittany in lines 13 through 16:

> In Breteyne this layes were wrought,
> First y-founde and forth y-brought,
> Of aventours that fel bi days,
> Whereof Bretouns maked her layes.[81]
>
> [These lays were made, first composed and then produced in Brittany, of adventures that happened in olden times, about which Bretons made their lays.]

[77]Lucien Foulet. "The Prologue of Sir Orfeo." *Modern Language Notes* 21, no. 2 (1906): 46.
[78] Gabrielle Guillaume. "The Prologues of the *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*." *Modern Language Notes 36*, no. 8 (1921): 463.
[79]*Ibid.,* 463.
[80]For a more in-depth discussion on the reconstruction of *Sir Orfeo's* prologue see: Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Orfeo:* Notes." in *The Middle English Breton Lays.* Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995 and Gabrielle Guillaume. "The Prologues of the *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo.*" *Modern Language Notes 36*, no. 8 (1921): 458-64.
[81]Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Orfeo.*" in *The Middle English Breton Lays.* Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995. ll. 13-16.

Sir Orfeo clearly grounds itself in the Breton tradition. Yet although the poem notes that these lays were first composed and produced in Brittany, it neglects to mention that *Sir Orfeo* is in fact derived from the much older Greek Orpheus myth. Apparently, such information would not be deemed important for the lay whereas its grounding in Breton tradition seems vital. The *Lay le Freine* poet announces the poem's Breton origin in a similar manner: "In Breteyne bi hold time / This layes were wrought, so seith this rime." [In Brittany in olden times, these layes were made, so says this rhyme.][82] Out of the three lays in the Auchinleck Manuscript, *Sir Degaré*'s poet seems to take the most subtle approach to identifying its Breton features. Rather than literally stating that the poem was composed in Brittany, *Sir Degaré* finds its place in the Breton tradition through the identity of its protagonist. Indeed, the poem notes: "In Litel Bretaygne was kyng" [In Brittany there was a king.][83] This king of Brittany is Sir Degaré's grandfather and therefore Sir Degaré himself is a Breton. Unlike *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré* at no point establishes that it is a Breton lay by saying so directly. So, all three of the lays describe some form of origin related to Brittany, whether through the location of the narrative or through the poets' literal announcement texts' Breton lay identities. As a result it can be established that medieval audiences would expect the Breton lays to somehow be established in Brittany, be it through character heritage or rumoured composition in a lay's prologue.

A rather more subtle characteristic of the lays seems to be how all three of the lays make some sort of reference to a forgone age. In the beginning lines of *Sir Degaré* the poet is clearly referring to olden times as he notes: "Knightes that were sometime in londe" [Knights that were once in the land.][84] A similar reference to ages past is made in the prologues to *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* within the lines that also speak of the contents of the lays: "Of old aventours that fel while" [Of old adventures that happened once.][85] This line and the one from *Sir Degaré* both show the interest in the telling of stories that happened in the past. It is highly likely that medieval audiences would have expected the lays to reference a narrative that took place in the past as well as being placed or composed in Brittany.

As was noted before, the editions of *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* under examination have an identical set of prologue lines. Interestingly though, the uniform introductions to *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* do provide valuable insight into what might have been expected for

[82] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Lay le Freine.*" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995. ll. 13-14.
[83] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Degaré.*" in *The Middle English Breton Lays.* Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995. l. 9.
[84] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Degaré.*" l. 3.
[85] Anna Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Orfeo.*" l. 8.

Breton lays, as they state directly what features should be found in lays. The following lines have been taken from a version of *Sir Orfeo* but are identical to the version of *Lay le Freine* used in this thesis and will therefore only be quoted once:

> We redeth oft and findeth y-write,
> And this clerkes wele it wite,
> Layes that ben in harping
> Ben y-founde of ferli thing:
> Sum bethe of were and sum of wo,
> And sum of joie and mirthe also,
> And sum of trecherie and of gile,
> Of old aventours that fel while;
> And sum of bourdes and ribaudy,
> And mani ther beth of fairy.
> Of al thinges that men seth,
> Mest o love, forsothe, they beth.[86]
>
> [We often read and find written, and scholars know this well: Lays that are in song, are composed about marvellous things; some are of war and some of grief. And some are of joy and also gaiety, and some of treachery and of guile. [And some are] of old adventures that happened once; and some of jokes and bawdiness, and there are many about the fairy world. Of all the things that people relate, most, in truth are of love.]

These lines show that lays' narratives could feature a range of different themes, and still be counted among the Breton lays. The lines end by stating that the theme of love, was the most commonly portrayed theme of the lays. Considering the narratives of all three of the lays under discussion, it would indeed seem sensible to say that one of the main subjects of the Breton lays is love. Therefore, it would make sense to state that medieval audiences would have expected to find a theme of love when enjoying one of the Breton lay narratives.

Another important feature of the lays' pronouncement of their identity is the reference to an oral tradition or some form of minstrelsy. As can be found from the excerpts above, all three of the lays make some mention of oral performance or minstrelsy. For both *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* there are several instances in which the poet references the lays in relation to the performance by minstrels, but also where the lay seems to be written in order to be performed. Given that these lays have very similar introductions, I will discuss only one in support of this argument. First of all, the first few lines of both of these poems mention the involvement of minstrels in the lays,: "Lays that ben in harping / Ben y-founde of ferli thing:" [Lays that are in

[86] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Orfeo*." ll. 1-12

song, are composed of marvellous things.][87] Moreover, these particular lines are not the only reference to minstrelsy in the poem. Further on, the poet once more confirms the importance of the Breton lays being composed as songs:

> When kings might ovr y-here
> Of ani mervailes that ther were,
> Thai token an harp in gle and game
> And maked a lay and gaf it name
>
> [When kings anywhere might hear, of any marvels that there were. They took a harp in performance, and made a lay and gave it a name.]

From these lines can be gathered that performance was a rather important aspect of these texts; the poet mentions the performance of the lays not once but twice. In this way, it could be argued that the medieval audiences of the Breton lays would have expected the lays to be grounded in some form of minstrelsy in the sense that, they either refer to the composition of the lay as a song or to the performance of such lays.

Furthermore, besides the evident reference to minstrelsy, all three of the lays have also been written down in such a way that the poets words seem more like the words of a minstrel, giving a performance, than something that is being put on paper, and meant to be read. Indeed, here the introductions of *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo* are also quite clear:

> Now of this aventours that weren y-falle
> Y can tel sum, ac nought alle.
> Ac herkneth, lordinges that ben trewe,
> Ichil you telle of "Sir Orfewe."[88]
>
> [Now of these adventures that have happened, I can tell some but not all. But listen, Lords that are loyal, I will tell you of "Sir Orfeo."]

The above excerpt shows that the poet is clearly using words that would signal an oral performance. While words such as 'to tell' might also be used for literary purposes, a word like 'listen' is surely representative of an oral performance. When combined with the poet telling his audience to listen, him saying that he will tell them of the lay about Sir Orfeo arguably strengthens the notion of the lay having at some point been a song or poem that was performed

[87] Anna Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Orfeo."* ll. 3-4.
[88] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Orfeo*." ll. 21-24.

by minstrels. Similarly, for *Sir Degaré* the oral pronouncement can be found in the lines: "Lyseneth, lordinges, gente and fre, / Ich wille you telle of Sir Degarre:" [Listen, gentle and noble lords, I want to tell you of Sir Degaré.][89] Of course, these lines could also simply be the poet announcing that he is going to start his narrative. However, in comparison to the lines of *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* that refer to a purpose for oral performance, it is likely that these introductory lines were also meant to imitate how a minstrel might have started off a tale. Indeed, these features, that are similar across all three of the lays, may therefore be read as part of their defining characteristics. It is likely that, in reading a Breton lay medieval audiences would expect a form of storytelling that resembled how a minstrel might have performed the lay. Of course, the other side of this would be that the poems were simply written down in a way that they might have been performed by the minstrel.

Another key feature that might be drawn from the lays' introductions is how they all seem to place themselves within a tradition of similar narratives. In so doing, all three of the lays under discussion establish themselves as part of a larger collection of existing narratives. The poets *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* shows this particular feature in how they say: "Now of this aventours that weren y-falle / Y can tel sum, ac nought alle" [Now of these adventures that have happened, I can tell some but not all.][90] By stating this, the poet ensures that his narrative is seen as part of a range of narratives, or adventures, but that there are so many that he simply cannot tell them all. A similar idea occurs at the start of *Sir Degaré,* where the poet notes how there were knights who went looking for adventures day and night: "Hou thai mighte here strengthe asai; / So dede a knyght, Sire Degarree: / Ich wille you telle what man was he." [How they might try their strength. So did a knight, Sir Degaré. I want to tell you what kind of man he was.] This excerpt shows that the poet mentioning the other knights and how they would go in search of adventures. In so doing, the poet places *Sir Degaré*'s knightly adventures within a larger tradition of other narratives. Put in comparison with the introduction of *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*, there is clearly a resemblance, as all three poets find it necessary to establish their texts in a tradition of narratives. Arguably then, medieval audiences might have expected that if they were reading, or listening to, a Breton lay, the lay would acknowledge that is only one of many narratives that might be told.

To conclude, various aspects of the three Middle English Breton lays under examination in this chapter provide evidence regarding what medieval audiences might have expected from the

[89] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Degaré*." ll. 1-2.
[90] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. "*Sir Orfeo*." ll. 21-22.

Middle English Breton lays in general. Several of the features shared between the prologues of *Lay le Freine, Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré* seem to be concerned with establishing the texts in a literary history, or tradition. The most noticeable feature of these lays is how they are adamant on establishing themselves within the Breton tradition. This is in the sense that their prologue either places them in Brittany or somehow connects the composition of the narrative to Brittany. Similarly, the prologues of the lays place their narratives not only within a Breton tradition, but also in what I have called a narrative tradition. The poets of the Auchinleck's Breton lays seem to find it necessary to establish their narratives within a range of other narratives in order to show that they are not standalone works, but that they belong within a larger tradition. Consequently, it is likely that medieval audiences would have expected a Breton lay to firmly establish itself within literary tradition, be that one of Breton lays, or of similar stories.

What is more, the Middle English Breton lays' poets also show an inclination towards writing their poems as though they were being performed by minstrels. This in turn shows that medieval audiences would have likely expected the lays to be written in a style that imitates how the narratives might have been performed in minstrelsy, or it could show that even as far as the fourteenth century when private reading was becoming more common, the audiences of the Breton lays might have expected these narratives to be performed by a minstrel.

Overall, the prologues of these three Middle English Breton lays shownot only that the lays had many similar features—features that might in turn have established the expectations of their audiences—but also that the lays can clearly be placed within a literary tradition of their own.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to explore the expectations that medieval audiences might have had for the Middle English Breton lays. It has done so by looking at three different Breton lays within the context of the Auchinleck manuscript and the texts surrounding the lays in this manuscript, and also by comparing how the three lays identify themselves. While all of the following conclusions, as previously noted, can be based only on assumptions, they have been rooted in research of the lays' cultural contexts. This approach was taken with regards to the theories of literary analysis by both Fredric Jameson and Hans Robert Jauss—two scholars who both suggest that looking at texts within their cultural contexts is vital for analysing them properly. The different approaches taken in this thesis to find an answer as to what expectations medieval audiences would have had for the Breton lays have allowed for several arguments to be made in that regard.

First, an examination of the three Breton lays – *Lay le Freine, Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré* – in relation to the texts that precede and follow them in the Auchinleck MShas yielded the following conclusions. Where the manuscript is concerned, all three of the lays were paired with, at the very least, one religious narrative, and a secular text. In most cases these religious narratives were meant to portray moral lessons to their audiences. Similarly, the combinations of the religious texts with the Middle English Breton lays have in some circumstances, like with *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré,* allowed for arguments to be made for a moral reading of the lays. As chapter 3 showed, the combination of the lays with religious narratives specifically those that portray a moral lesson, is one that strengthens the lessons sometimes already portrayed in the lays themselves. By making these religious combinations, the compiler of the Auchinleck MS could have been trying to attribute the Breton lay tales with a greater didactic force. He may have been attempting to restrain the more, arguably, "fun" lays within a didactic framework by combining them with the highly didactic religious texts. Therefore, reading the lays in the context of the Auchinleck manuscript shows that lays were likely read not only for entertainment but also for didactic or religious purposes.

Moreover, the emphasis on the lays' didactic purposes cannot only be found in their combinations with the religious texts but also the combinations with secular texts. For instance, when read in close proximity to each other, the poets of *Sir Degaré* and *Lay le Freine* seem to warn people away from abandoning their children or leaving them as foundlings; both these poems illustrate the problems that might occur if such a thing is done.

The analysis of the lays in chapter 4 has revealed even more features that seem to offer insights into what medieval audiences would have expected of the lays. I would argue that the most apparent feature of the Auchinleck's three lays, is how all the lays root themselves in a literary tradition. All three of the poets ensure that their audiences know that their narratives are rooted in a range of other similar narratives, be this through the telling of *Sir Degaré* as one of many stories about knights and their adventures, or through the introductions of *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* that essentially note what narratives would often be told. The lays' poets also emphasise their narratives' status as Breton. While all three of the lays establish this status differently, they do make sure that they are indeed established within Breton tradition.

Equally important is the noticeable way in which the introductions to *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* essentially establish the characteristics of the genre themselves. They note the inclusion of the fairy world, a love theme, tales of woe and joy et cetera. These passages seem to reflect an idea of what would be expected of the contents of a Breton lay. Arguably, a poet would not write down these specific genre characteristics if they were not found in a large range of texts. The prologue clearly means to emphasise that the range of themes it mentions are common to those texts that define themselves as lays. While most of these supposed characteristics, according to the poet, differ per lay, the theme of love is said to be prevalent in most of them. Correspondingly, the narratives of the three Breton lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript can indeed all be seen to involve some form of love, be it motherly, romantically or otherwise.

Many of the arguments above stem from analysis of written evidence, such as the lines from *Lay le Freine, Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*, the examination of the Auchinleck manuscript, and the exploration of connection between the lays and other at first seemingly contrasting texts. However, more research could be done into this topic; for instance, an examination of more Breton lays, whether in French or in Middle English, might reveal even more interesting facts regarding contemporary audiences' expectations for Breton lays.

In conclusion, this thesis has shown some interesting things regarding the medieval horizons of expectations for the Middle English Breton lays. In the first chapter of this thesis I highlighted some of the scholarly discussion and definitions on the Breton lays, and I have found that the modern definitions and the medieval horizons of expectations appear to differ. It seems that Breton lays were meant to serve not only as entertainment in medieval England but that they also seem to have served some kind of didactic function. Medieval audiences would likely have expected to gain knowledge of some moral lesson at the end of one of these narratives. Moreover, as has become clear from the arguments above, the lays were also

invested in tradition, be that a tradition of placement in Brittany or as a narrative rooted in minstrelsy. While all the findings here are limited due to the nature of the surviving evidence, they nevertheless offer insight into the role of Breton lays in medieval culture and suggest that there is merit in the exploration of medieval audiences' horizons of expectations.

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