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# The *Lay le Freine* and the *Lai le Fresne*: a comparative analysis

With an exploration of its Celtic connections

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## ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricate relationships between the anonymous Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*. The primary inquiry revolves around the nature of their connection, with an additional aim to uncover potential Celtic elements within these literary works.

The Middle English Breton lays, crafted during the late 13<sup>th</sup> to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, include *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, the *Lay le Freine*, *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Sir Launfal*. Of particular interest is the *Lay le Freine*, housed in MS Auchinleck, which merits attention due to its direct link to Marie de France's literary works.

The *Lay le Freine*, a Middle English Breton lay, holds a unique position as a translation of Marie de France's earlier *Lai le Fresne*. However, its selection for scrutiny goes beyond this association, offering a compelling narrative with a female protagonist, deviating from contemporary conventions. Incorporating various folklore motifs, the lay appeals broadly, both in its historical context and potentially in contemporary times.

Celtic languages embody rich historical and cultural roots, and 'Celtic literature' includes works from Celtic nations or featuring themes associated with Celtic culture. The *Lay le Freine*, authored anonymously in Middle English, adapts Marie de France's Breton poems originally penned in Anglo-Norman. The time gap of approximately two centuries and the shift in geographical context make this adaptation a fascinating subject of exploration.

The structured approach comprises three chapters building on the introductory section, aiming to enrich our understanding of the connections between the *Lay le Freine* and its sources. The first chapter provides an overview of the *Lay le Freine*'s genre positioning, historical context, and physical preservation, including a panoramic overview of MS Auchinleck. The second chapter delves into an in-depth analysis of the *Lay le Freine*, exploring its narrative complexities, thematic elements, and intertextual connections within MS Auchinleck. The third chapter focuses on a comparison between the *Lay le Freine* and the *Lai le Fresne*, aiming to highlight differences and similarities, particularly in character analysis.

Building upon insights gained, the research question about the relationship between the anonymous Middle English Breton lay, the *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne* is answered in the conclusion. Additionally, the quest to identify potential Celtic elements is explored, contributing to the broader understanding of these intricate relationships.

While confirming the presence of Celtic elements in the *Lay le Freine*, the study evolves into a more extensive exploration, delving into the comparison between the source text, the *Lai le Fresne*, and its horizontal translation (following Folena's typology), the *Lay le Freine*. Addressing the original query and offering a detailed perspective on the interaction between the two literary works, this research broadens scholarly discourse. It sheds light on the dynamic interplay of linguistic, historical, and cultural elements within the broader context of medieval literature.

The study reveals new possibilities, including the *Lay le Freine's* unconventional versification and disparities in prologues compared to the *Lai le Fresne*. Exploring the author's perspective, variations in setting, themes, religious spheres, and roles of women provide insights into literary constructs and thematic choices. Culturally and linguistically, choices around translation, societal expectations, and the embedding of Celtic elements in material objects contribute to a richer understanding.

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## INTRODUCTION

What is the nature of the relationship between the anonymous Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*? This inquiry forms the focal point of our investigation in this study. An additional aim is to explore the presence of Celtic elements within these literary works.

The Middle English Breton lays, including *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, the *Lay le Freine*, *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Sir Launfal*, were crafted during the late 13<sup>th</sup> to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Among them, only *Sir Launfal* and the anonymous *Lay le Freine* exhibit a direct connection to the works of Marie de France. Housed in MS Auchinleck (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 19.2.1), these lays, particularly *Sir Launfal* and the *Lay le Freine*, merit attention due to their association with Marie de France's literary endeavours.

The *Lay le Freine*, in particular, holds a distinctive position as a translation of Marie de France's earlier *Lai le Fresne*. However, the selection of the *Lay le Freine* for scrutiny goes beyond its association with the *Lai le Fresne*. The lay offers a compelling narrative featuring a female protagonist, a departure from the conventions of its time. Additionally, it incorporates various folklore motifs that contribute to its broad appeal, both in its historical context and, potentially, in contemporary times.

Unlike some other Middle English Breton lays, such as *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Sir Degaré*, where magical elements permeate the entire narrative, the *Lay le Freine* takes a subtler approach to the magical. Nevertheless, being a Middle English Breton lay implies an inherent connection to magic, albeit in a less overt manner. The term 'Breton' in this context serves as a clear indicator of the expected presence of magical elements within the narrative.

The link between the Breton lays and the Celtic world is deeply ingrained, both culturally and linguistically. The Bretons, descendants of those who migrated from Britain after the 5<sup>th</sup>-century invasion by the Angles and Saxons, spoke Breton, maintaining linguistic ties to the Celtic heritage. Similar to the people in Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and Ireland, the Bretons retained an interest in Celtic stories. They not only preserved these narratives within their own communities but also shared them with the courts of France and beyond. Given that the Breton lays were crafted by Celtic-speaking Bretons, they

undeniably belong to the broader Celtic tradition. This significance is particularly noteworthy because certain Breton lays, including the *Lay le Freine*, are often perceived as English adaptations of earlier French Breton lays, reinforcing the unmistakable Celtic origins of these poetic works.

The rationale behind this investigation is not only driven by personal interest but also stems from the interdisciplinary nature of Germanic philology, which delves into written testimonies in Germanic languages, encompassing civilizations rooted in the Germanic world. This temporal domain spans from the Late Antiquity to the medieval period, encompassing the mutable reality of those people who produced culture in Germanic languages. Furthermore, this exploration aligns with the parallel discipline of Romance philology, which studies the Romance languages and their written texts as Marie de France draws inspiration from the Celtic tradition, transforming narratives designed for oral delivery into written compositions that align with the conventions – metrical, linguistic, thematic, and related to narrative structure – of Romance literature.

In examining the connection between Marie de France's 12<sup>th</sup>-century work, the *Lai le Fresne*, and the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Middle English Breton lay, the *Lay le Freine*, the analysis, while centred on Middle English literature, encourages a broader exploration of French literary production, bridging the interdisciplinary realms of both Germanic philology and Romance philology.

The interconnection between these disciplines becomes evident through the study of English and French, the languages central to this thesis. Beyond linguistic analysis, an exploration of the associated cultures, histories, and traditions reveals a noteworthy presence of the Celtic world in both realms. Despite its significance, the Celtic influence often remains overlooked, with existing research dating back to earlier periods. The enduring legacy of Celtic languages, culture, and tradition necessitates a closer examination.

Celtic languages reflect rich historical and cultural roots, while 'Celtic literature' broadly includes works in non-Celtic languages from Celtic nations or featuring themes associated with Celtic culture. The connection between Breton lays and the Celtic world is profound, marked by both cultural and linguistic ties.

The *Lay le Freine* takes centre stage in this research, authored anonymously in Middle English, adapting Marie de France's Breton poems originally penned in Anglo-Norman. The time gap of approximately two centuries and the shift in geographical

context make this adaptation a fascinating subject of exploration. Marie de France drew inspiration from the Breton tradition, and the anonymous Middle English author, in turn, found inspiration in her works. This study seeks to uncover the roots of their shared inspiration and contribute new perspectives to past scholarly research.

The structured approach comprises three chapters, each building on the foundation laid in the introductory section and culminating in a comprehensive conclusion. By undertaking this exploration, the thesis aims to enrich our understanding of the connections between the *Lay le Freine* and its sources.

The first chapter of the thesis aims to provide a clear overview of where the literary work *Lay le Freine* positions itself genre-wise, historically, and in terms of its physical preservation. This includes an introduction to Middle English Breton lays, their classification as a genre, and their stylistic and linguistic characteristics. A panoramic overview of MS Auchinleck, the collection housing the *Lay le Freine*, will be presented, focusing on its historical aspects, physical composition, and its significance in the literary world.

This emphasis was chosen to situate the studied text, the *Lay le Freine*, within a specific literary context. Identifying its genre affiliation is crucial for a more profound understanding of its characteristics. This foundation becomes particularly relevant as the subsequent analysis includes a comparison with its source text, Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*, and its companion lays preserved in the MS Auchinleck. Describing the MS Auchinleck is essential to offer additional historical and cultural context, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the literary landscape.

Moving forward, the second chapter will delve into an in-depth analysis of the *Lay le Freine*. This includes exploring its narrative complexities, thematic elements, and intertextual connections within MS Auchinleck. The chapter will scrutinize the lay's distinct characteristics, concise structure, and historical context within the troubadour tradition. Attention will be given to its unique features, contrasting them with the French source, and analysing thematic elements. The chapter will also offer an overview of correlations with other Middle English Breton lays within MS Auchinleck.

The decision to dedicate an entire chapter to the analysis of the *Lay le Freine* stems from the recognition that, to effectively compare it with its source, Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne* (the primary objective of this research), a comprehensive understanding of the lay's core and its specific characteristics is paramount. Furthermore, this analysis serves



the purpose of situating the *Lay le Freine* within the broader context of the manuscript where it is preserved, alongside its companion lays, in order to identify potential correlations.

The third and final chapter, preceding the conclusion, will focus on a comparison between the Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*. This comparative analysis aims to highlight differences and similarities in these literary works, shedding light on their storytelling variations. Additionally, the chapter will dedicate attention to character analysis, providing insights into the personas found in the *Lay le Freine*. The investigation seeks not only to identify and examine potential Celtic elements within the lay but also to enhance our understanding of its cultural and literary context.

Building upon the insights gained from the preceding chapters, the research question regarding the nature of the relationship between the anonymous Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne* will be answered in this section. Additionally, the secondary quest to identify potential Celtic elements, another relevant aspect of our research investigation, will be explored.

The thesis will conclude after the third chapter, presenting the results of our investigation and addressing the questions posed in the research. Our objective is to delve into the literary and cultural connections between the French source text, the *Lai le Fresne*, the Middle English *Lay le Freine*, and the Celtic world, offering an exploration that contributes to the broader understanding of these intricate relationships.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Middle English Breton Lays and The Auchinleck Manuscript

### 1.1. Introduction

Before delving into the core of this research, which will be discussed in the next chapter and which will focus on the analysis of the *Lay le Freine*, the Middle English Breton lay inspired and directly connected to the *Lais le Fresne* attributed to Marie de France and part of a wider collection of her works, it is mandatory to offer a clear overview of where this literary work places itself genre-wise, historically, and where its physical make-up is preserved, as well.

For these reasons, in this chapter, I will begin with a brief introduction explaining what the Middle English Breton lays are, how they classify as a genre and their main stylistic characteristics, as well as presenting their historical and linguistic features.

The subsequent paragraphs will focus on a panoramic overview of MS Auchinleck, the collection containing the *Lay le Freine*, the core of this research. The description of MS Auchinleck will concentrate on its historical aspects, on its physical make-up, and on its importance in the literary world, both linguistically and culturally.

After presenting the Middle English Breton lays and dedicating a subparagraph to MS Auchinleck, a brief introduction to Marie de France and her contribution to Medieval literature will be given, before moving onto a summary of the direction taken by Celtic literature and the parallel evolution it was going through at the time, investigating whether or not it exerted an external influence in the composition of the *Lay le Freine*.

I will then dedicate a last subparagraph to the conclusions and the main considerations regarding this entire chapter before moving onto the second one which will see an in-depth analysis of the *Lay le Freine* as its focal point.

## 1.2. The Middle English Breton Lays

The Breton lay, as a genre, without the additional attribute of 'Middle English' could possibly refer to any of the short poems written between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries corresponding to literary versions of orally sung works produced by the ancient Bretons and accompanied by string instruments. The formal establishment of the literary genre is credited to Marie de France, who wrote twelve Anglo-Norman lays which wholly reflect this way of storytelling typical of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Marie de France's *Lais* are set in a specific geographical area and encompass Brittany, Wales and Normandy. These stories revolve around chivalry, courtly love, and courtesy, which greatly appealed to their readers at the time. Marie de France's literary works are considered, to a certain degree, prototypical for this specific genre and were, of course, imitated in the following century, albeit several being lost nowadays.<sup>1</sup>

The Middle English group of lays comprises: the *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther* and *Sir Launfal*. These works were written in the timeframe that goes from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The *Lay le Freine*, whose author has not been identified yet, is considered to be a horizontal translation<sup>2</sup> of the original works produced by Marie de France herself.<sup>3</sup>

Despite what was previously said, assigning a specifically fitting definition to the Middle English Breton lay as a genre is not an easy task, but the general guidelines can be summarised this way: a Breton lay is usually a short romance set in Brittany (or, at least, referencing to Brittany) and, most of the time, the narrative it presents is associated with Marie de France's *Lais*.<sup>4</sup>

The *Lay le Freine* is classified as a Breton lay as it appears to be referencing to one of Marie de France's *Lais* – the *Lai le Fresne* – and because some support the theory that it is, along with the other lays, either set in Brittany or alluding to Brittany. The poems are identified by different names, such as *conte*, *geste* and *romance* highlighting how, at the time they were written, their categorization was more generic arising confusion about whether it is possible to consider the Middle English Breton lay a genre in itself or not.

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<sup>1</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, *Breton Lay* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 65-120.

<sup>2</sup> Word taken from Gianfranco Folena, *Volgarizzare e tradurre* (Turin, IT: Einaudi, 1991). 'Horizontal translations' are reformulations of the same story in different vernaculars, with distinctive features compared to 'vertical translations' from Latin to vernaculars.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony C. Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters" in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990): 117-156.

<sup>4</sup> Albert C. Baugh, *A Literary History of England* (London: Routledge, 1967), 196.

What most scholars seem to agree on, though, is that the two genres – lay and romance – are closely related to one another.

Among these scholars, John Finlayson considers length one of the main characteristics to distinguish the lay from other versions of romance written in Middle English. According to him, the lay can be considered a sub-genre of the latter, a shortened version of a full-on ‘novel’ and Finlayson’s interpretation proves to be true as, generally speaking, these works are rarely longer than 12.000 lines of text compared to the majority of their contemporary romance counterparts. The lays are related to romances because of their shared ascent-descent storytelling pattern which sees the protagonist going through a journey towards a final resolution and finding their own place in the world.

However, the specific definition of Middle English Breton lay remains blurred and classifying a work as such, when the analysis needs to delve deeper than surface level, often depends on the scholar’s criteria evaluation as the lay hardly adapt to a single formulaic pattern due to its non-uniform, ‘sub-type of romance’ nature which makes the lay undistinguishable from the romances due to the same recurring combinations of motifs.<sup>5</sup>

Taking the *Lay le Freine* as a touchstone, it is shown that the Middle English Breton lays were composed in a timeframe that spreads around 100 years and that there are some differences to take into account among the different Middle English lays.

The *Lay le Freine* is one of the first lays to be composed in English (the others being *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*). It is structured in octosyllabic couplets while the more recent lays (*Erle of Tolous*, *Sir Launfal*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Gowther*) were composed in tail-rhyme stanzas.<sup>6</sup> The group to which the *Lay le Freine* belongs more accurately embodies the Breton orally sung tradition we previously discussed, as it preserves the octosyllabic form typical of Marie de France’s works. The lays written later on, instead, reflect more of a tradition generally found in other Middle English romances. Both versions, though, do show a musical metre and rhythm which, according to experts, could refer to the minstrels’ tradition of singing stories to an audience.<sup>7</sup>

The only lays explicitly referring to music are *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Cleges*. Both report a scene of minstrelsy while in the others, the reference to music is not overtly displayed but,

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<sup>5</sup> John Finlayson, “The Form of the Middle English Lay”, *The Chaucer Review* 19, No. 4 (Spring, 1985): 366-367.

<sup>6</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, *Breton Lay* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 122.

<sup>7</sup> Albert C. Baugh, *A Literary History of England* (London: Routledge, 1967), 196.

instead, somewhat present in the background, moulding the atmosphere of the scenes themselves. What is evident, however, in all the lays is that they were realised with the purpose of being read aloud and performed in front of an audience due to repetitions, rhyming and encouragement to listen.

To define a genre, several elements must be considered. Form is usually the key element for distinction, but is not the only one. Other specific features are the socio-cultural environment, the dating of a work, and the subject or matter. As aforementioned, the Middle English Breton lay is not an easily definable genre although it is commonly acknowledged that it falls within the overarching category denoted by the term 'romance'. Due to its evasive nature, not only style and structure must be considered but their 'informal' characteristics as well.

As previously said, out of all the lays, the main focus of this thesis is on the *Lay le Freine* and its prologue identifies the subject matter which is recurrent in many of the other lays. The opening of the literary work sets the scene for an audience used to a traditionally oral style of storytelling and to definite topics as, for example: adventure, the Fairy World, betrayal and, above all, love.<sup>8</sup> These themes were known by the public from a narrative point of view due to the them being courtly motifs.

In both the nuclear family and the outside world, reality could be harsh. However, these challenges found a place in literature for analysis and reflection, offering potential solutions. In the literary realm, betrayal is depicted as met with punishment, and adventures are punctuated with gleeful and humorous relief. At the same time, though, the realism linked to the lays is also infused with otherworldly enchantment and this is provided by the influence of the Celtic fairy world in the *Lay le Freine* (but also in *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Sir Degaré*) and by a religiously miraculous – Christian – imprint in others (namely: *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Sir Cleges*). The Otherworld, be it magical or religious, becomes the norm; something that is perceived just slightly out of our reach, beyond the veil that separates otherness from the ordinary, everyday life.

However, the main theme of these works of literature remains love which is a subject that plays a central role both in the Middle English romances – despite it not being

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<sup>8</sup> "We redeth oft and findeth ywrite - And this clerkes wele it wite - Layes that ben in harping|Ben yfounde of ferli thing. Sum bethe of wer 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 maner beth of fairy. Of al thinges that men seth, Mest o love for sothe thai beth.|In Breteyne bi hold time This layes were wrought, so seith this rime. When kinges might our yhere|Of ani mervailles that ther were, Thai token an harp in gle and game, And maked a lay and gaf it name.|Now of this aventours that weren yfalle, Y can tel sum ac nought alle.", *Lay le Freine*, ll. 1-20.

the only one – and in the lays, as well as in Marie de France’s writings. There are, however, some important distinctions to be made: Marie de France’s *Lais* focus on courtly love, portraying arranged marriages and the need to fulfil one’s own happiness outside of it. On the contrary, in the Middle English Breton lays we find the culmination of two lovers’ story to be marriage itself, putting marriage as the final objective to reach happiness and not as a cage to escape from. This could happen also because the lovers actually choose one another instead of being forced together by societal expectations.

The *Lay le Freine* is among those (the others being: *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Degaré*, *Erle of Tolous*, and *Sir Launfal*) which show this tendency while the other lays (*Sir Orfeo*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Cleges*) focus on the reunion of an already married couple. The shortness of these works along with the literary choice of giving space to this realisation of love reflects with the reality of the public community making these lays more relatable compared to Marie de France’s *Lais* which portrayed a harder to grasp and distant world.<sup>9</sup>

Moving onto the presence of magic in some of the lays, the storyteller places the everyday reality of the audience into a different, parallel dimension to dive into an otherworldly place, filled with adventure, mystery and magic influencing the course of the events. Brittany is a place that has inspired writers of the likes of Chaucer to delve into the charm of the otherworldly dimension and it is generally accepted that Chaucer himself was familiar with three of the Middle English Breton lays: the *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Degaré*. This is because it is implied that he capitalized on the current trend, strategically leveraging the allure of the 'old-fashioned' and sentimental nostalgia evoked by the genre.<sup>10</sup>

The implication mentioned above addresses a poetic appropriation process that is not uncommon in medieval literature and the sentimental nostalgia supported by the magical atmosphere of the Breton tradition were considered a much fertile ground in this regard. In the case of Chaucer, this seems to be linked to a sort of return of the ancient Celtic tradition that moved to Brittany in the earlier times. The Middle English Breton lays tell stories of people from Britain who lived in an ancient past and do not deal with contemporary Bretons inhabiting Brittany.<sup>11</sup> While these two distinct groups maintain their unique identities, they share a common cultural and genealogical heritage. This is

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1978), 179.

<sup>10</sup> Laura A. Hibbard Loomis, “Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck MS”, *Studies in Philology* 38, No. 1 (January, 1941): 14-33.

<sup>11</sup> Emily K. Yoder, “Chaucer and the ‘Breton’ Lay”, *The Chaucer Review* 12, No. 1 (Summer, 1977): 74-77.

evidenced by the linguistic connection, as the term 'Breitagne' encompasses both Britain and Brittany, paralleled by the shared linguistic roots in 'Briton' and 'Breton.' Historically and strategically, Brittany has played a pivotal role for both France and Britain. The historical rivalry between these nations is skilfully employed to bring the Middle English Breton lays into focus. This deliberate spotlighting serves to reintroduce a cultural claim agenda, a pursuit embraced by numerous 12<sup>th</sup>-century authors, including Marie de France.<sup>12</sup>

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Normans introduced French language and culture to England. However, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they were superseded by the prevailing influence of their English counterparts. As the successor to Richard II, Henry IV declared English as the official language of Britain. The shift was further solidified by the opening of Parliament in English rather than French. This decisive move marked the ascendancy of English over French in England. Consequently, English poets and writers redirected their focus towards an English-speaking audience, moving away from the prior multilingual approach. In the *Lay le Freine* we find evidence of this because its anonymous author explicitly indicates that the protagonist's name, Ash (OF *fresne*), means 'asche' in English:

Bifel a cas in Breteyne,

Whereof was made *Lay le Frain*;

In Ingliche for to tellen ywis

of an asche for sothe it is.<sup>13</sup>

Geography-wise, the author of the *Lay le Freine*, contrary to Marie de France's original version, places Brittany as a part of England and this tendency can be seen in other lays as well like, for example, in *Sir Orfeo* where a magical area in Greece becomes Winchester (the ancient Anglo-Saxon capital city). Similar but more subtle changes can be spotted in *Emaré* as well, because the story is set outside of Brittany as if it belonged to England, and in *Sir Launfal* too, where the alterations make it more palpable and applicable in the context of 14<sup>th</sup>-century England. All of these adjustments exist with the sole purpose of turning Marie de France's *Lais*, with emphasis on the 'de France' aspect, into Middle

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<sup>12</sup> Desmond Seward, *The Hundred Years War: The English in France, 1337–1453* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1978), 79.

<sup>13</sup> *Lay le Freine*, ll. 23–26.

English Breton lays, highlighting the 'English' component. This was done to make the stories more appealing and relatable to the public engaging with them at the time.<sup>14</sup>

From a sociological perspective, an analysis of the thematic elements within the French *Lais* reveals a profound reflection on both personal and societal identities, mirroring the historical context of the time. This reflection manifests through various identifiable narrative motifs present in the *Lais*, such as the persecuted queen and wife in *Erle of Tolous* and *Emaré*, the child born through a pact or contract in *Sir Gowther* and *Sir Orfeo*, and the conflict between father and son in *Sir Degaré*.<sup>15</sup>

Folktales often serve as a projection of the social realities from which they originate, offering a lens through which the general population can examine their world. Scholars argue that these tales, while rooted in a specific social environment, notably underscore the value of an ever-changing society and advocate for the continual adaptation of its norms.<sup>16</sup>

The lays differ from one another also in regional terms as distinct dialects are used. In the case of the *Lay le Freine*, its dialect has been localised in the area of London or Middlesex and it is similar to Chaucer's one. The same rings true for *Sir Orfeo* while *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Degaré* are instead placed somewhere in the South Midlands. *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré* and *Sir Gowther* have, on the contrary, probably originated in the Northeast Midlands. According to some scholars, this variety in terms of region and dialect suggest that the lays were addressed to two different kinds of audiences placing the earlier written lays (the *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Degaré*) into a category composed for a more 'noble' group of people, linked to courtly traditions and the later written ones (*Erle of Tolous*, *Sir Launfal*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Gowther*) for a more rough and earthy crowd.<sup>17</sup>

By the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the audience had expanded to include a broader segment of society due to the increasing prevalence of literacy across various social strata. Consequently, the production of manuscripts aligned with a rising demand for reading materials that resonated with the diverse concerns of this expanding audience.

The Breton lays mentioned above belong to different manuscripts and the works found in them, which were created in the timeframe of over 100 years, show that along

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony C. Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters" in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990): 117-156.

<sup>15</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, *Breton Lay* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 122.

<sup>16</sup> Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), 30.

<sup>17</sup> John B. Beston, "How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?" in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature* (1974): 319-336.



with an increased demand there was also a change in the assortment of literary preferences. The *Lay le Freine*, together with *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Degaré*, can be found in MS Auchinleck which was copied around 1330 in London<sup>18</sup> and which will be talked about more extensively in the next subparagraph.

MS Auchinleck is considered 'literary-dense' while the works found in the later composed and miscellaneous manuscripts have a more 'devotional' imprint, showing a shift in the interest of the English public.<sup>19</sup> Despite this change, though, the themes and the literary nature of the Middle English Breton lays remain relevant. The relevance of these manuscripts suggests that England was going through a flourishing literary and literacy-oriented time that showcased a newfound need to redefine common social norms and to privatise the act of reading. According to some scholars,<sup>20</sup> evidence of this is given by the presentation and the layout of the works which appear quite private-reader-oriented.

The texts written in these anthologies had multiple purposes: the romances provided entertainment and escapism to the readers; the more teaching-infused works could prove instructive when addressed to children; the more pious and reflective ones could perhaps give comfort and ponderation to whoever needed it. Notwithstanding the purpose of these collections, it is generally agreed that the materials serve a more private – rather than public – audience and are more family-inclined adding the importance of the reception and the interaction with the public to the list of elements taken into consideration to define a genre.

### **1.3. The Auchinleck Manuscript**

Among the manuscripts where the Breton lays can be found, MS Auchinleck (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 19.2.1) is the most prominent, both content and appearance-wise. The importance of this manuscript is impressive as it contains, despite 13 works being lost: 334 ff. and 44 items. The latter are divided into: 18 romances, a chronicle (and a list of names of Norman barons), 2 religious-infused stories focusing on

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<sup>18</sup> Laura A. Hibbard Loomis, "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340", *PMLA* 57, No. 3 (September, 1942): 595-627.

<sup>19</sup> Janet Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers: Literature and Society, 1350-1400*, (San Francisco, CA: ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2008), 71.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance", *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 11-35.

the theme of miracles, 8 tales addressing saints' lives and holiness, a supernatural narrative piece mentioning a trip to the Otherworld (the notorious *St Patrick's Purgatory*), a comical story, 2 debates, a homily, 2 cautionary tales, 3 pieces on religious teachings, and 3 satire-filled works.<sup>21</sup> The *Lay le Freine* is part of the romance category which is also the one dominating the manuscript from a quantitative perspective and pointing out the popularity of this genre at the time.<sup>22</sup>

From a historical point of view, there is not much information regarding the early history of MS Auchinleck, and what is known mainly derives from little evidence and tentative suppositions. In 1744 the manuscript was in the hands of Alexander Boswell, also known as Lord Auchinleck, who was a member of the Faculty of Advocates and who showed it to the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh. The most accredited theory is that he probably had the kind of connections and prestige that allowed him to interact with influential bibliophiles who helped him get certain rare and valuable literary works into his possession.

Proof of the manuscript being in his collection in 1740 is also given by his signature appearing on a blank page along with this year written down. In the manuscript, there is an inscription recording Boswell's donation to the Advocates' Library and it initially was marked with 'MS W.4.1' while hosted there but was renamed 'MS 19.2.1' (its actual name and categorisation) after being re-catalogued in 1840. It can be currently found at the National Library of Scotland after a donation of illegal works made by the Faculty of Advocates itself in 1925 (year of birth of the National Library of Scotland).

Analysis conducted on the manuscript highlight that MS Auchinleck was most likely created between 1331 and 1340; this aspect will be addressed later in this subsection. However, information concerning who is earlier owners were and readers were is unfindable. The apparently audience-friendly imprint of MS Auchinleck seem to point out that it may have been composed in London. It is a work of considerable dimensions, professionally curated and with a clear design structure, suggesting that it may have been made on a consumer's request even though the question of said consumer's actual identity remains unanswered.

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<sup>21</sup> Laura A. Hibbard Loomis, "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340", *PMLA* 57, No. 3 (September, 1942): 150-187.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance", *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 11-35.

Some scholars presented different theories over the years: the commissioner may have been a London merchant<sup>23</sup> or a self-established woman whose name appears in the list of Norman names found in the manuscript itself. What scholars seem to agree on, though, is that the person who requested the creation of this literary collection was someone who was quite wealthy.

In the manuscript, quite a few names can be found but none of them have ever showcased anything substantial. Some of these names include members of a family from medieval times which were all written by the same person: Mr Thomas Browne, Mrs Isabell Browne, Katherin Browne, Eistre Browne, Elizabeth Browne, William Browne, Walter Browne, and Thomas Browne.

Still belonging to the medieval period, on different parts of MS Auchinleck, other names were found: Walter Brown, standing on its own; and a group of apparently unrelated names written on the margins of the volume and on some spaces in between paragraphs. The 5 names belonging to the historical period around either the 14<sup>th</sup> or the 15<sup>th</sup> century are: William Barnes, Richard Drow (the name is undiscernible), William Dro... (the name is incomplete), Anthony Elcocke, and John Ellcocke. A couple more additional names signed after the Middle Ages are found too: William Gisslort (the name is undiscernible), from the 16<sup>th</sup> century; John (17<sup>th</sup> century); Christian Gunter (18<sup>th</sup> century); and John Harreis. As previously previewed though, the search for information concerning these people has yet to give any results and the reason why their names are written here and there in the manuscript is still object of speculations nowadays.

Moving on to the physical make-up of MS Auchinleck<sup>24</sup>, it should be noted that there have been multiple studies surrounding it and adding discoveries. As previously mentioned, the collection was most likely produced between 1331 and 1340 and this date is based on internal references and palaeography.

The current binding presented by the manuscript is not its first one but probably its third due to the presence of notes written in pencil pointing out that the leaves of gathering 47 were reassembled in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it took place in 1971 in Edinburgh. The second binding possibly happened in the 1820s because of the Advocates' Library restoring some of its volumes. The only trace of the first binding, instead, comes from the sewing holes left behind.

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Pearsall, and Ian Cunningham, eds. *The Auchinleck Manuscript: National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS. 19.2.1*. (London: Scolar Press, 1977).

<sup>24</sup> "Physical make-up" The Auchinleck Manuscript, National Library of Scotland, last modified May, 2003, <https://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/physical.html>.

Nowadays, the manuscript is composed of 331 leaves and 14 stubs, while 10 additional leaves which are part of MS Auchinleck are preserved outside of it: 4 are kept in Edinburgh in the University Library; 4 can be found at the University Library in St. Andrews; and 2 are held at the University Library in London. All the leaves are made of vellum and have been reduced in size. Any additional deficiency was caused by miniature hunters who used to cut out the entire leaf where the miniature was placed or just the miniature itself leaving the once-intact leaf behind. The manuscript has currently been repaired but in some parts it is still visible that a few leaves are still missing.

The supposedly correct number of works found in the original manuscript is given by its numbering system indicating that, nowadays, there are 47 surviving writings whilst circa 17 other ones are marked as lost which is, unfortunately, an impressive quantity. Still thanks to the manuscript numbering system, it is possible to discern the position the missing text were originally occupying: 5 could originally be found at the beginning of the anthology; 5 between positions 37 and 43; four between 46 and 51; and, finally, 3 between 56 and 60. The positioning is, however, not completely accurate and relying heavily on the numbering of the lost pages without taking much into account human's intervention.

Analysing the spaces in MS Auchinleck, the only visible ones appear at the end of every fascicle (groups of quires written in a continuous way with no space in-between them) with the exception of a single one. The existing fascicles are 12 and are made up of between 1 and 9 quires each. Each of these quires are then divided into 8 folios (except for one which presents 2 additional ones). Of these quires, only 2 of them are independent from one another and the rest, while all the other 45 are instead co-dependent when it comes to their content. Every fascicle presents a poem of considerable importance at its own beginning which introduced the main topic. The theme could be of different persuasions, such as: religion, adventurers, patriots, and, of course, love). The pattern followed by the fascicles which should explain how they were organised and arranged during their creation is quite erratic making it difficult to decipher a clear structure.

Despite this, though, we can safely say that the items are in their right and original order because of the work numbering and the catchwords addressing what follows in the next quire. Additionally, also contributes to this phenomenon. These catchwords are 37 and can be seen in the lower right-hand corner of the last page of every quire and while 36 of them were written by the same hand, one differs. The different scribes working on the manuscript, though, linked their items to one another's proving the efficient organisational work that went behind it.

All the items are numbered, the number being a lower-case numeral placed at the centre of the upper margin of every side of a leaf that is to be read first. These numbers were all written by the same person but the differences highlighted in the colour of the ink suggests that they were not placed at the same time as the text; additionally, mistakes indicate that the numerals were not added consecutively but rather that the works were handled by different people and then placed back in the hands of the main editor who then fixed the numbering every time it was needed.

To write the title of each work red ink was used and every title was added as the last step after copying and decorating had been done and probably at the same time that numbering was placed. Possibly due to this or because they were perceived as an afterthought, the titles look chaotically thrown into any available space.

Moving onto the decorative work of the manuscript, it appears that some planning was done beforehand as the decoration looks considerably uniform and clean. The first letter of every line of text is written in red ink and every scribe probably tried their hand at it, given the inconsistency of how every first letter is isolated throughout the whole manuscript. Another sign of different craftsmen at work is given by the different styles used for paragraph signs. This difference in style occurs at the beginning of each new quire, indicating that the scribes worked on every quire separately.

Most items (except for one), showcase large initials painted in blue and decorated with red ornaments and, given the consistency found throughout the whole anthology, it is implied that it was work of the same artist. The surviving previously addressed miniatures, as well, which originally preceded the written text are all designed in the same way proving, once again, that they too are the work of the same craftsman. Same as the miniatures and the initials, the format of the codex is consistently designed despite several irregularities having been ignored.

It is generally agreed that MS Auchinleck was copied by six different scribes who are all anonymous and apparently only worked on this single anthology. All the works are written in different shades of brown ink, again proving the existence of different people working on the manuscript. The ruling was done by the scribe who got the quire assigned to them and when they were substituted by someone else, the difference was visible due to the different hand readapting the style. It seems most likely that there was no definite assignment of tasks and that possibly all the scribes could have contributed to the creation of the manuscript in equal portion.

However, additional information is discernible about each craftsman thanks to palaeographical considerations. One of the scribes mainly focused on copying the list of names found in the codex as his handwriting and styled appears well-suited for the task. Two other craftsmen shared an incredibly similar handwriting making it difficult to discern who is who and initially making scholars doubt they were different individuals.<sup>25</sup> The hand of another scribe is, on the contrary, very discernible due to its hard-to-read writing style. The last two scribes present some peculiar characteristics which suggest one of them may have been familiar with working in a monastic scriptorium while the other one highly skilled in manuscript production.

After briefly addressing the history and the make-up format of MS Auchinleck, the aspects regarding its importance are bound to be addressed. Linguistically speaking, the manuscript plays an important role in the history of the Middle English language. Different dialect profiles linked to every scribe who worked on the codex have been isolated and extensively analysed providing very valuable information. The craftsmen have been geographically located as coming from these areas: Middlesex, London, Essex and a place bordering both Gloucestershire and Worcestershire.<sup>26</sup>

MS Auchinleck houses a vast compilation of Middle English poetry from an era with a relatively limited number of surviving Middle English texts. Because of this, it has invaluable worth in regard to the literary reality existing before Chaucer's, presenting the wide range of different genres we described at the beginning of this subparagraph. The use of couplet and stanzaic verses as well as alliterations seem to suggest that the people who worked on MS Auchinleck and readers living in London were familiar with literary items born in geographical realities stretching beyond their own.

Among the 23 works uniquely belonging to MS Auchinleck, the group of 8 romances is what the manuscript is most known for, literary-wise as it is unusual for such a high number of Middle English romances to be found in a single volume. The variety of themes represented is also remarkable: stories of both English (*Guy of Warwick*, *Beues of Hamtoun* and *Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild*) and French (*Otuel*, *Roland and Vernagu*) heroes; Arthurian romances (*Of Arthour & of Merlin*, *Sir Tristrem*); romances portraying the Otherworld (*Sir Orfeo*, *Reinbroun*); epic-style heroes' tales (*King Richard*, *Guy of*

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<sup>25</sup> Pamela A. Robinson, 'The 'Booklet', A Self Contained Unit in Composite Manuscripts', *Codicologica* 3 (1980): 46-69.

<sup>26</sup> Angus McIntosh, M.L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, Vol.1 (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986).

Warwick). Various forms are represented, encompassing Breton lay, didactic romance, as well as stanzaic and couplet structures.

MS Auchinleck could be considered one of the firsts, if not the actual first, collection of works addressed to literary and historical English-speaking enthusiasts as it does not contain, contrary to many miscellaneous volumes written at that same time, works as, for example: recipes, remedies, accounts and predictions. It is also addressed to an English-speaking audience as texts written either in French or in Latin are absent, and it is also intended for an audience that lacks the linguistic skills to read either language, thereby excluding the circle of the court or the high nobility.

MS Auchinleck holds cultural and linguistic significance as it provides a window into the literary milieu that influenced Chaucer and is evident in his writings. Scholars<sup>27</sup> argue that the *Canterbury Tales* exhibit a connection and familiarity with the literary tradition and linguistic characteristics found in MS Auchinleck. While this does not confirm Chaucer's direct engagement with the manuscript's contents, it underscores the shared literary environment of 14<sup>th</sup> century writers and readers. MS Auchinleck offers valuable insights into the development of English vernacular literature and language, serving as a precursor that shaped the works of Chaucer and his contemporaries.

For what concerns book production in England, MS Auchinleck is considered one of the earliest examples of commercial creation. It differs from other collections of the time, because it is neither a religious codex created in a monastic place nor something made with the purpose of providing useful advice and suggestions to an individual and their own community. MS Auchinleck was produced for a commercial and entertaining use and it is the result of a collaborative work. There is no certainty regarding how and where it was made but it was initially recognised as true that it was created by a collective of scribes according to the 'London bookshop' theory hypothesised by Hibbard Loomis where the scribes worked as a team equally splitting the work into composition, translation, and copying.<sup>28</sup>

According to Shonk, though, the work may have been directed by a single person who was responsible for the management of both the other craftsmen and the manuscript

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<sup>27</sup> Laura A. Hibbard Loomis, "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340", *PMLA* 57, No.3 (September, 1942): 595-627; Derek Pearsall, "Middle English Romance and its Audiences" in M. J. Arn and H. Wirtjes with H. Jansen (eds.), *Historical and Editorial Studies in Medieval and Early Modern English for Johan Gerritsen* (Groningen, NL: Welters-Noordhoff, 1982): 37-47.

<sup>28</sup> Laura A. Hibbard Loomis, "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340", *PMLA* 57, No. 3 (September, 1942): 150-187.

creation, as well.<sup>29</sup> Several newer studies have been made concerning the nature and the reality of the scribes' collaboration as well as the geographical extension of the familiarity with different literary works both writers and readers had and what it means for the development of literature in England (and in London).

#### 1.4. Marie de France

Scholars have assigned dates to Marie de France's works ranging between approximately 1160 and 1215, representing the earliest and latest conceivable timeframes, respectively. The initial record of an author identified as 'Marie' dates back to the 1160s. During this time, the author dedicated a compilation of Breton lays - brief narratives influenced by Celtic lore and courtly literature - to a monarch, likely Henry II Plantagenet. Following this, within an alternative text, namely the *Fables*, the author affixed the same name with the suffix 'de France' in the signature, thereby authenticating the work.

The author asserted that the *Fables* comprised an adaptation of King Alfred's English translation of Aesopic tales. These narratives were crafted for an unidentified Count William. In approximately 1190, an additional account featuring 'Marie' surfaced: she undertook the translation of the *Espurgatoire seint Patriz (St Patrick's Purgatory)*, a narrative detailing the journey of an Irish knight to the Otherworld. Taking this religious work of monastic origin - the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii* by the Cistercian monk Henry of Saltrey - and translating it into the vernacular, Marie de France thereby rendered it accessible to a more diverse audience.

As is readily apparent, the details surrounding Marie de France are scant, and contemporary knowledge is coupled with conjectures put forth by scholars. She composed her *Lais* during the period spanning from 1160 to 1180, employing, as previously noted, the octosyllabic verse characteristic of the Breton oral tradition. Her literary creations drew upon three distinct genres - namely, the Breton tale, the animal fable, and the spiritual voyage - thus amalgamating diverse literary traditions and linguistic registers. While her thematic focus primarily revolves around tales of love, she also delves into

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<sup>29</sup> Timothy A. Shonk, "The Scribe as Editor: The Primary Scribe of the Auchinleck Manuscript", *Manuscripta* 27 (1983): 19-20.



narratives involving transgressions and redemption, alongside an exploration of human and animal social dynamics and the natural order.<sup>30</sup>

As previously indicated, Marie de France crafted her compositions in English, synthesizing influences from Celtic oral traditions, Anglo-Saxon, and Latin written traditions. Marie herself provides a hint regarding her French origins in the *Fables*: “Marie ai num, si sui de France” (my translation: “Marie is my name, and I am from France”), signifying her affiliation with the region of Île-de-France.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, scholarly speculation suggests that she may have been associated with and resided at the English court of king Henry II Plantagenet, who held the titles of King of England, Duke of Aquitaine and Normandy, as well as Count of Anjou during that era.

From a linguistic perspective, determining the original dialect of Marie de France's works proves challenging due to the multiple interventions by scribes who transcribed the manuscripts containing her compositions. However, there is a prevailing consensus that she likely composed in Insular French, the language spoken at the court of Henry II.<sup>32</sup>

Marie de France demonstrated proficiency in Latin, as attested to in the prologue of the *Lais*, where she asserts her intent not to translate a new work from Latin but rather to draw inspiration from the oral tradition of the lays. Additionally, her command of English is evident through her translation of the *Fables*, and she also has extensive knowledge of oral tales and lays stemming from Breton folklore while her familiarity with the lays and the oral narratives stemming from Breton folklore further enriches her linguistic repertoire.

Marie de France's literary productions emerged during the 12<sup>th</sup> century and were profoundly shaped by the prevailing literary currents of the time – specifically, the ancient Celtic tales and the ethos of courtly love.<sup>33</sup> Marie de France conceives of love as an absolute and sublime emotion, portraying the lover as one who willingly submits to the lady and demonstrates devotion through the surmounting of various challenges. This conceptualization of love is characterized by its clandestine nature, with relationships being shrouded in secrecy, thus idealizing a form of love that is both destructive and emotionally taxing. Additionally, the author draws inspiration from the Celtic tradition, transforming narratives designed for oral delivery into written compositions that align

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<sup>30</sup> Roberta L. Krueger, “11 – Marie de France, from Part III – Medieval women”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 172–183.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Brunckner, *Les Fables/Marie de France* (Louvain, BE: Peeters Publishers, 1991), 366.

<sup>32</sup> Emanuel J. Mickel Jr., *Marie de France* (New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 17.

<sup>33</sup> Philippe Walter, *Marie de France, Lais* (Paris, FR: Folio Classique, 2020), 7-15.

with the conventions – metrical, linguistic, thematic, and related to narrative structure – of Romance literature.

Marie de France is credited with twelve lays: *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Les Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laustic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chevrefeuille*, and *Eliduc*. These lays are preserved in five distinct manuscripts.<sup>34</sup> However, for the purposes of this thesis, our focus will be on MS Harley 978, which encompasses all the lays along with their prologue. The MS Harley 978 is composed in Anglo-Norman, housed in the British Library, and dates back to the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The attribution of all the lays found in the manuscript to Marie de France has been a subject of ongoing debate among critics and scholars.<sup>35</sup> Richard Baum contends that MS Harley 978 does not constitute a deliberate collection, and the mere mention of Marie de France's name three times does not necessarily indicate a single authorship. In contrast, Jean Rychner supports the notion that the presence of a general prologue supports the idea of compiling various works to form a cohesive collection. According to this perspective, it is more logical to attribute the collection to a singular writer, namely Marie de France, rather than considering the possibility of multiple authors.

The presence of two prologues, a concise one in MS Harley 978 and a more extensive and intricate version in the *Lai de Guigemar*, emphasizes that they do not present a contradiction, as one might expect from two distinct authors, but rather form integral components of a shared conceptual framework, mutually reinforcing each other. Marie-Louise Ollier underscores the dual nature of Marie de France's works, characterized by both inclusivity and fragmentariness. Each lay functions as a self-contained narrative without an overarching, collective moral theme. Nevertheless, readers are entrusted with the task of discerning a holistic perspective that unifies the entire collection.

Marie de France adeptly navigates two distinct literary traditions: the realm of Breton wonder and the courtly world. Despite their close interconnection, neither tradition subjugates the other. In Marie's narratives, wonder serves merely as a means for the protagonist to achieve their objectives, lacking inherent significance for the ultimate outcome of their endeavours. Similarly, courtly love undergoes a transformation, shedding some of its typical characteristics such as subservience and devotion to the most affluent

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<sup>34</sup> Glyn S. Burgess, *Marie de France. Supplement n.1 : an analytical bibliography* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1986), 7.

<sup>35</sup> Marie-Louise Ollier, "Les Lais de Marie de France ou le recueil comme forme", in *La nouvelle: genèse, codification et rayonnement d'un genre médiéval. Actes du Colloque International de Montréal (14-16 octobre 1982)*, publ. Michelangelo Picone, Giuseppe di Stefano et Pamela D. Stewart (Montréal, QC: Plato Academic Press, 1983), 64-79.

and high-ranking lady at court. This underscores the author's celebration of spontaneous and natural love, devoid of the challenges or conquests inherent in the courtly game.<sup>36</sup>

Marie de France introduces a diverse and dynamic cast of female protagonists, each distinct from the others, all driven by their individual desires to pursue love. They emerge as the architects of their own destinies, far more than mere instruments for the realization of male counterparts' personal aspirations. Love, emancipated from societal standards and the influence of magical elements, emerges as the primary theme in her lays, intertwining with humankind's freedom of choice.

While not all her narratives conclude with a happy ending, they share a common leitmotif: the predestined union of two lovers, with destiny guiding their convergence. In all her lays, Marie de France positions the pair of lovers as the driving force, the ultimate expression of completeness toward which all characters aspire. Significantly, this completeness is consistently found outside the confines of marriage, emphasizing the motif of the unsatisfied noble wife. Wives frequently experience a sense of captivity due to spousal jealousy but attain freedom through the potent force of love, a profound expression of their desire to liberate themselves from familial control. Yet, this love must remain concealed to avert tragic consequences.

Among the two favourite themes of contemporary novelists, adventure and love, Marie chooses the latter. Love, in her works, emerges as both the impetus and the objective, devoid of deep temporal, historical, and political dimensions. Notably, she devotes a lay, *Milun*, to her vision of perfect love, where the protagonists, overcoming time and myriad obstacles, remain steadfast, culminating in the birth of a child symbolizing the consummate union of the two lovers.

## 1.5. Celtic influences

The connection between the Breton lays and the Celtic world is rooted both culturally and linguistically. The Bretons, descendants of the inhabitants of Britain who migrated after the invasion by the Angles and Saxons in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, spoke Breton. They retained their linguistic ties to the Celtic world and maintained an interest in Celtic stories, akin to the

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<sup>36</sup> Edgar Sienaert, *Les Lais de Marie de France. Du conte merveilleux à la nouvelle psychologique* (Paris, FR: Honoré Champion, 1984), 182.

peoples who relocated to Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and Ireland. The Bretons further disseminated their lays to the courts of France and beyond.<sup>37</sup>

To understand the term 'Celtic,' it is essential to consider linguistic distinctions. Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Breton, and Cornish are all classified as Celtic languages. However, Irish and Scottish Gaelic fall under the category of 'Goidelic,' while Welsh, Breton, and Cornish are referred to as 'Brittonic.' Culturally and anthropologically, the Celts in the British Isles were divided into two groups: the Gaels and the Britons.<sup>38</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Bretons, much like the Welsh, Cornish, Scots, and Irish, did not necessarily identify themselves as Celtic speakers, despite being so from a linguistic standpoint. Nevertheless, the Breton lays, composed by the Bretons who were Celtic speakers, unequivocally belong to the Celtic tradition. This is particularly significant as there is a prevalent belief that certain Breton lays, including the *Lay le Freine*, represent English renditions of earlier French Breton lays, affirming the undeniable Celtic roots of these poems.

Celtic literature refers to written works composed in Celtic languages or, more broadly, literature written in languages other than Celtic that draws inspiration from traditional narratives found in early Celtic literary traditions. Within the field of Celtic studies, scholars employ the term 'Celtic literature' to encompass diverse literary bodies written in Celtic languages. This encompasses works in Irish, Welsh, Cornish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic, and Breton, irrespective of whether they are in their contemporary or historical linguistic forms, as previously noted.<sup>39</sup>

In a broader context, the term 'Celtic literature' is often used to describe literature written in a non-Celtic language that either originates from Celtic nations or incorporates subjects and themes associated with Celtic culture. An example of this is found in medieval Arthurian romances written in French, which are heavily influenced by Celtic sources. In a contemporary setting, this more comprehensive definition extends to English-language literature created by writers of Irish, Welsh, Cornish, Manx, Scottish, or Breton descent. The scope may also include literature in Scots and Ulster Scots. In this expansive sense, the application of the term 'Celtic literature' varies as widely as the usage of the term 'Celt' itself.

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<sup>37</sup> Thorlac Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 116.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Squire, *The Mythology of the British Islands: an Introduction to Celtic Myth, Legend, Poetry and Romance* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), 29.

<sup>39</sup> John V. Kelleher, *Matthew Arnold and the Celtic Revival. Perspectives of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 197–222.

Examining Marie de France's *Lais* in the context of their connection to Celtic literary elements reveals an intriguing overlap between the tangible, human world and an alternate, non-Christian realm. This otherworldly dimension is intricately linked to Breton folklore, and the transition between these dimensions is often characterized by crossing thresholds symbolized by natural obstacles, including rivers, seas, forests, and similar impediments.

The two realities depicted in Marie de France's *Lais* serve as mirrors to each other, revealing a striking resemblance between the magical inhabitants of the otherworld and their human counterparts, each marked by their own imperfections. However, in the otherworld, reality takes on a fantastical quality, offering enchanting narratives where social structures and accepted behaviours diverge from those in our world, presenting unexpected twists.

In this narrative framework, characters play a functional role in driving the plot and undergo a development that typically leads to a specific purpose, often a moral lesson or a cautionary tale. The characters hold a central position in the story, with the reality of the narrative constructed around them. Time and space, in this context, are relative and limited to the confines of the tale itself, usually mentioned briefly and solely serving the functional needs of the unfolding action.

The narrator in Marie de France's *Lais* often provides a pre-emptive acknowledgment of the presence of supernatural elements, serving as a kind of 'warning' to the reader. This forewarning allows the reader to engage with the story without questioning the reality of the fantastical occurrences presented. Notably, Marie de France explicitly sets her *Lais* in Britain, a region connected in the audience's expectation to narratives that may transcend the boundaries of everyday human reality.

While Marie de France incorporates various topical elements from the Breton tradition in her works, the characters and locations encountered by her protagonists are not explicitly linked to fairies or the otherworld. Instead, many events are attributed to human intervention. These magical motifs function as narrative instruments, influencing the characters' lives and morals with a psychological impact.<sup>40</sup> This approach makes the otherworldly elements less overtly invasive than might be expected, placing human tenacity and agency in the foreground of the narrative.

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<sup>40</sup> Edgar Sienaert, *Les Lais de Marie de France. Du conte merveilleux à la nouvelle psychologique* (Paris, FR: Honoré Champion, 1984), 193.

In the context of Marie de France's *Lais*, the majority of the narrative unfolds within the confines of the real world. The role of magic in these tales is predominantly to illuminate the hypocrisy inherent in the courtly world and to underscore the injustices suffered by the protagonists. Marie de France's narratives pivot towards themes of justice and love as their focal points. While magic assumes a secondary role, it is portrayed as a redemptive force when embraced and a destructive force when rejected, showcasing a connection between the otherworld and humanity.

Throughout Marie de France's *Lais*, magical elements serve as harbingers of joy and stand as adversaries against any form of cruelty and injustice. They emerge as agents of retribution, ultimately punishing those who commit crimes against love. The interplay between the magical realm and the human one in these narratives mirrors a thematic alignment, emphasizing the transformative and moral dimensions of magical interventions in the characters' lives.

## **1.6. Conclusions**

In this inaugural chapter of the thesis, we introduced the Middle English Breton lays by attempting to define them, drawing upon existing research on the topic. This involved elucidating the Middle English Breton lays' primary features, encompassing both historical and stylistic dimensions, and offering insights into their linguistic placement within the broader literary landscape.

Following this concise panoramic overview, attention shifted to a detailed examination of MS Auchinleck. As previously highlighted, this manuscript houses the *Lay le Freine*, the primary focus of this thesis, along with other Middle English Breton lays that will be explored in subsequent chapters. MS Auchinleck's historical attributes, linguistic significance, and cultural importance in the literary domain were duly considered. Furthermore, a brief exploration of its physical composition was undertaken.

Subsequent to the exposition on MS Auchinleck, the exploration delved into a detailed examination of Marie de France's life. As expounded in the dedicated subsection, Marie de France is widely acknowledged as the author of twelve Breton lays, composed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Anglo-Norman. These lays serve as a primary source of inspiration for

the Middle English Breton lays, with the *Lay le Freine* being a derivative of Marie de France's *Lais le Fresne*.

The narrative not only dedicated attention to Marie de France's writing style but also provided an overview of her characters, the thematic elements she emphasized, and her ideals and morals that permeate her works. This exploration was closely tied to the enigma surrounding her identity, as briefly outlined in an accepted biography.

The concluding subsection of this initial chapter provided a clear definition of the term 'Celtic', elucidating the languages encompassed under this umbrella term. Particular emphasis was placed on the Breton language and the historical context of the Bretons. Additionally, a description of Celtic literature connected to the genre of Breton lay was presented. This discussion maintained a focus on Marie de France's writings and laid the groundwork for the subsequent chapters of the research, outlining the investigation into the identifiable Celtic influences within the author's poems.

In the upcoming chapter, the attention will shift towards an in-depth exploration of the *Lay le Freine* and its distinctive characteristics. This will encompass an examination of its preservation, the timeframe of its composition, and the thematic content it addresses. Additionally, the chapter will delve into the relationships between the *Lay le Freine* and the other Middle English Breton lays housed in MS Auchinleck, highlighting both the connections and divergences that define these literary works.

## CHAPTER 2

### **The *Lay le Freine***

#### **2.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, a thorough analysis of the Middle English Breton lay titled *Lay le Freine* is presented. The focus is on exploring its narrative complexities, thematic elements, and intertextual connections with other lays within MS Auchinleck. The *Lay le Freine*, derived from Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne* and expanded by Jean Renart, is scrutinized for its distinct characteristics, concise structure, and historical context within the troubadour tradition.

The examination begins with an exploration of the lay's unique features, contrasting them with the French source. The narrative evolution from Marie de France to Jean Renart's *Roman de Galeran de Bretagne* is traced. The *Lay le Freine*'s thematic elements, including the life journey of the protagonist Le Freine, are analysed, emphasizing unexpected twists, romantic entanglements, and the resolution's fairy-tale ending.

The chapter delves into the prevalence of literary motifs drawn from folklore, examining the interplay between religious and magical elements. The *Lay le Freine*'s cultural significance is explored, particularly its commentary on women's roles and virtues. The construction of Le Freine's silence is examined for its narrative implications and societal connections.

In addition to the individual analysis, the chapter provides an overview of correlations with other Middle English Breton lays within MS Auchinleck. A comparative exploration with lays such as *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Sir Launfal* reveals shared themes, distinctive features, and potential influences. The chapter also notes the unique presence of *Sir Cleges* in MS Auchinleck, classified as a minstrel tale due to its focus on minstrels and minstrelsy.



While ll. 121-133 are missing, the narrative concludes after l. 340. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the *Lay le Freine's* textual construction, notably its prologue shared with *Sir Orfeo*, and proposes an English origin for the prologue. Thematic similarities are explored between the *Lay le Freine* and other lays in MS Auchinleck, such as *Sir Degaré*, highlighting shared motifs despite distinct narrative trajectories. The interconnectedness of these lays enriches the understanding of the *Lay le Freine* within the broader medieval literary milieu.

## 2.2. The *Lay le Freine*: an overview

In the preceding chapter, we discussed the Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*, which exists in a singular manuscript copy known as the MS Auchinleck. This work is recognized as a horizontal translation of Marie de France's *Lais le Fresne*, a composition from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century consisting of 518 lines. Notably, the *Lay le Freine* is shorter than its Old French source text, comprising 340 lines (excluding the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reconstructed ending, which would augment the line count to 408).

During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne* gained considerable popularity and underwent expansion, transforming into a more extensive Old French romance titled the *Roman de Galeran de Bretagne*. This adaptation was undertaken by Jean Renart, a trouvère from the Picard region who was active in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Aside from *Galeran*, Jean Renart is definitively attributed to three works: two metrical chivalric romances, *L'Escoufle* and *Guillaume de Dole*, and a lay, the *Lai de l'Ombre*. Unfortunately, little else is known about him or his life.

The trouvères, poet-composers who crafted and performed lyric poetry in the northern dialects of France during the High Middle Ages, were prevalent during Renart's era. It was a common practice for writers, including Renart, to incorporate themes, words, or concepts from other significant literary works, and such intertextuality was viewed as a gesture of respect.<sup>41</sup>

The *Lay le Freine's* 22-line prologue is a notable example of this practice, and it is attached to two versions of *Sir Orfeo*, another Middle English Breton lay found in MS

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<sup>41</sup> Joan Brumlik, "Thoughts on Renaut's Use of Marie's Fresne in Galeran de Bretagne", *Florilegium* 14 (1995-96): 87.

Auchinleck. These versions can be located in MS Harley 3810 (folio: 1r-10r) and MS Ashmole 61 (folio: 151r-156r). The lines of the prologue display slight variations in characters, possibly attributed to different hands from diverse areas. However, it remains indisputable that they represent the same prologue. This certainty is grounded in the identical content and structure, seamlessly extending from the opening line to the concluding full stop.

In section 2.3. of this chapter, titled 'The *Lay Le Freine* and its companion lays,' we will provide a concise comparison of the prologue found in the *Lay le Freine* within MS Auchinleck and the prologue of *Sir Orfeo* found in MS Harley 3810. It's worth mentioning that the copy of *Sir Orfeo* within MS Auchinleck does not include a prologue. This practice highlights the prevalent medieval custom of freely incorporating material from one text into another. In the medieval period, the custom of freely incorporating material from one text into another was shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, literary, and educational factors. Unlike the modern emphasis on individual authorship and intellectual property, medieval societies had distinct norms that allowed for a more fluid exchange of narratives.

One contributing factor was the prevalence of oral tradition, where stories were transmitted verbally across generations. This tradition provided storytellers with the flexibility to adapt narratives based on their audience or cultural context. When these stories were eventually transcribed, scribes often integrated existing material, adding variations and interpretations in the process.

Manuscript culture further influenced this practice. The painstaking process of copying texts by hand meant that scribes might combine or rework existing material when creating new texts. The transmission of knowledge relied heavily on the circulation of manuscripts, and this communal approach to storytelling allowed for a dynamic interplay of narratives.

Cultural exchange played a crucial role as well. Medieval societies were characterized by the borrowing and sharing of ideas, and texts were often considered communal property rather than individual creations. Authors were less concerned with originality in the modern sense, prioritizing the transmission of knowledge and moral lessons.

The interconnected nature of literary traditions across regions and linguistic communities also contributed to the free exchange of stories, motifs, and themes. Different cultural perspectives influenced authors, resulting in a diverse and rich literary landscape.

In educational settings, students learned by copying and imitating existing texts, a practice known as imitation or emulation. This educational approach further facilitated the replication of certain narrative elements or structures across different works.

The comparison between the two prologues will be investigated in section 2.3. 'The *Lay le Freine* and its companion lays' of this chapter. The *Lay le Freine* has undergone damage, resulting in partial reconstruction through the addition of 68 lines written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to provide an ending to the poem. The authorship of the lay remains uncertain.

The principal theme of this concise Middle English Breton lay revolves around a female protagonist, Le Freine. Abandoned at birth, she is nurtured as a foundling in a nunnery under the care of a benevolent abbess. Le Freine faced abandonment at birth when her mother, fuelled by envy toward her neighbour's twin sons, propagated rumours insinuating that only two fathers could lead to the birth of twins. Ironically, the mother, later giving birth to twin girls herself, succumbed to the societal fears she had fuelled and chose to abandon one of her own children.<sup>42</sup> The narrative encapsulates a superstition suggesting that virtuous women should have one healthy child at a time, with the notion that multiple births imply multiple fathers.

Eventually, she becomes romantically involved with a wealthy nobleman named Guroun. Pressured to enter into a legitimate marriage, Guroun weds another woman, unbeknownst to him and Le Freine, who turns out to be Le Freine's long-lost twin sister, Le Codre. The lay unfolds with Le Freine graciously accepting her circumstances and actively contributing to the preparations for Guroun's wedding to Le Codre.

Taking into account the reconstructed ending of the lay, the storyline takes an unexpected twist as Le Freine's true identity is revealed in the concluding moments. Her mother recognizes a distinctive cloth that had once swathed the infant Le Freine, establishing her true lineage. Guroun, upon discovering Le Freine's noble heritage, annuls his unconsummated marriage to Le Codre and subsequently marries Le Freine. Le Codre eventually marries another equally high-ranked nobleman.

The resolution of this lay, reminiscent of other Middle English Breton lays in MS Auchinleck, reunites the protagonist with her familial roots, culminating in a fairy-tale ending that underscores the triumph of virtue. While Le Freine's tribulations may not be as intense as those experienced by characters in other Middle English Breton lays such as

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<sup>42</sup> "And hou to children herself sche bore;| "And that o child I of sent thore,| In a convent yfostered to be", *Lay le Freine*, ll. 393-395.

Emaré, Sir Orfeo, or Sir Launfal, her unclaimed and potentially illegitimate status situates her on the periphery of her society, exposing her to vulnerability and potential social and psychological distress.

Nevertheless, Le Freine's journey signifies a gradual shift from isolation to connection and legitimacy within the secular community. Her progression spans from being an infant traversing nocturnal paths between villages to finding refuge within a tree, from residing in the caretaker's abode to seeking sanctuary in the convent, and ultimately transitioning from the role of a nobleman's mistress to that of a wife.

The text features a notable presence of literary motifs, particularly drawn from folklore.<sup>43</sup> Instances such as twin birth (exemplified in *Le Freine* and *Le Codre*), the abandoned or exposed child (*Le Freine*, left by her mother at birth), tokens facilitating recognition and identity establishment (the blanket initially left with infant *Le Freine*, enabling her mother's later recognition), the transformation of a seemingly degraded individual into nobility (as seen in *Le Freine* herself), and the theme of endurance being rewarded (underscored by *Le Freine*'s humility and kindness) are prevalent throughout.

Centring around the theme of endurance, intertwined with the rewarding outcomes of kindness and humility there are elements in the text that allude to themes of endurance, humility, and kindness being rewarded. Specifically, the character *Le Freine*, despite facing challenges such as being abandoned at birth and later becoming a servant, maintains a humble and kind demeanour. Her simplicity and lack of pride are highlighted in the narrative. Her own mother, who had abandoned her at birth, also recognizes and appreciates *Le Freine*'s virtues.

Additionally, the theme of enduring through difficulties is evident in *Le Freine*'s journey from being abandoned to finding acceptance and love in unexpected places. The narrative suggests that enduring hardships with grace and maintaining a humble attitude can lead to positive outcomes.

The concluding part of the text, where *Le Freine*'s true identity is revealed and she is welcomed into the family, further reinforces the idea that enduring challenges and embodying virtues like humility and kindness can ultimately be rewarded with love and acceptance.

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<sup>43</sup> Francis J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Vol. II (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 63-83.

The interplay between religious and magical elements within the lay shows that, while the poem frequently invokes the divine, it diverges from the typical religious prefaces and conclusions observed in other romances and lays, as exemplified in *Emaré*<sup>44</sup>. Despite this, it retains a level of religiosity that distinguishes it from more secular compositions such as *Sir Launfal*.<sup>45</sup> There are several instances where the divine is mentioned throughout the *Lay le Freine*, such as: the maiden's prayer to Jesus Christ for the well-being of the innocent child<sup>46</sup>; the abbess arranging for the child to be baptized by a priest<sup>47</sup>; an appeal to God's love, indicating a sense of piety and seeking divine favour.<sup>48</sup>

In the first chapter of this thesis, we posited that love stands out as the central theme in Marie de France's *Lais*. It intricately weaves itself with humanity's freedom of choice. Despite not all her narratives culminating in blissful conclusions, they consistently share a common motif: the predetermined union of two lovers, guided by destiny. The *Lay le Freine* provides a clear illustration of Marie de France's perspective, as the narrator neither disapproves of Le Freine's relationship with Guroun within the convent nor condemns Guroun's pretense of holiness to conceal their clandestine affair.

Marie de France's narratives extend beyond the theme of love, encompassing elements of justice. For instance, her stories portray instances of poetic justice, such as when Le Freine's malicious mother, who spreads false rumours about her neighbour giving birth to twin boys, experiences the irony of fate as she becomes pregnant with twin girls. This situation forces her to confront the repercussions of her own gossip, compelling her to abandon one of her new-borns, Le Freine.

In the *Lay le Freine*, despite the narrator refraining from condemning Le Freine's relationship with Guroun within the convent<sup>49</sup> or Guroun's pretence of holiness for a secretive affair,<sup>50</sup> the story unfolds as a moral lesson or cautionary tale. It weaves a

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<sup>44</sup> "Jhesu, that ys kyng in trone,|As Thou shoope bothe sonne and mone,|And all that shalle dele and dyghte,|Now lene us grace such dedus to done,|In Thy blys that we may wone -|Men calle hyt heven lyghte;|And Thy modur Mary, hevyn qwene,|Bere our arunde so bytwene,|That semely ys of syght,|To thy Sone that ys so fre,|In heven wyth Hym that we may be,|That lord ys most of myght.", *Emaré*, ll. 1-12.

<sup>45</sup> John C. Hirsh, "Providential Concern in the Lay le Freine" in *Notes and Queries Ser. NS* 16 (1969): 85-86.

<sup>46</sup> "'O Lord," she seyde, "Jesu Crist,|That sinful man bedes herst,|Underfong this present,|And help this seli innocent|That it mot ycristed be,|For Marie love, thi moder fre."", *Lay le Freine*, ll. 167-172.

<sup>47</sup> "'The abbesse lete clepe a prest anon,| And lete it cristin in funston."", *ivi*, ll. 227-228.

<sup>48</sup> "'For Godes love."", *ivi*, l. 134.

<sup>49</sup> "Oft he come bi day and night|To speke with that maiden bright.|So that with his fair bihest,|And with his gloseing atte lest,|Hye graunted him to don his wille|When he wil, loude and stille.", *ivi*, ll. 287-292.

<sup>50</sup> "He compast another enchesoun:|To be brother of that religioun.", *ivi*, ll. 277-278.

narrative that condemns envy and slander, as exemplified by the mother's ordeal, while simultaneously extolling the virtues of silence, patience, and generosity.

In the preceding chapter, we mentioned Marie de France's introduction of a diverse and dynamic array of female protagonists, each characterized by unique traits and propelled by individual desires. These women emerge as architects of their own destinies, surpassing mere roles as instruments for the fulfilment of male counterparts' aspirations. Within the *Lay le Freine*, the central moral conflict involves Le Freine and her mother. The mother, envious of her neighbour's twin sons, spreads rumours suggesting that twins can only result from two fathers.

This narrative incorporates a widespread superstition that virtuous women produce one healthy child at a time, with multiple births implying multiple fathers. According to John Boswell, while this superstition is found in folktales globally, its prevalence in high and late medieval materials may also reflect the heightened regulation of human sexuality characteristic of the late Middle Ages. The scholar also underlines that, during that era, prevalent beliefs, reinforced by canon law, attributed stillbirths, handicaps, and deformities to sinful sexual unions. And that there was also a prevailing notion associating multiple births with multiple partners. Clearly, factors such as shame, economic pressures, cultural biases, and various other influences could contribute to the unfortunate practice of child abandonment.

While the theme of the exposed child in the *Lay le Freine* may be seen as conventional, given its prevalence among medieval romance materials, its widespread occurrence in medieval literature could go beyond mere adherence to tradition. The *Lay le Freine* contributes to the cultural resonance of tales involving child abandonment. The connection between the fantastical Middle English Breton lays and historical context is intricate and subtle, posing a challenge to delineate. Although the codified cultural narrative carries a sense of optimism, its correlation with factual events remains speculative and, evidently, uncertain.<sup>51</sup>

While the *Lay le Freine* engages in the cultural dialogue concerning children, it also holds cultural significance as one among numerous medieval narratives that criticize women's expression while praising their silence. Thematically, Le Freine, akin to Emaré, extols virtues such as self-control, emphasizing restraint and patience. Contrary to the

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<sup>51</sup> John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 394.

attributes deemed as Le Freine's finest and most defining, her mother portrays the medieval stereotype of the envious and gossiping woman:

A proude dame and an envieous,  
Hokerfulliche missegging,  
Squeymous and eke scorning.  
To ich woman sche hadde envie;  
Sche spac this wordes of felonie.<sup>52</sup>

Significantly, her "missegging" and "wordes of felonie" elicit disdain from fellow women, leading to curses cast upon her by the others:

And ich woman therof might here  
Cursed hir alle yfere,  
And bisought God in heven  
For His holy name seven  
That yif hye ever ani child schuld abide  
A wers aventour hir schuld bitide.<sup>53</sup>

They prompt a rebuke from her own husband:

The knight himself was sore agramed,  
And rebouked his levedy  
To speke ani woman vilaynie.<sup>54</sup>

They result in God's retribution, embodied in the form of her own twins:

When God willed, she was unbound  
And delivered all with sound.<sup>55</sup>

And they lead to her own profound moral dilemma:

"Allas," sche seyde, "that this hap come!

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<sup>52</sup> *Lay le Freine*, ll. 60-64.

<sup>53</sup> *ivi*, ll. 77-82.

<sup>54</sup> *ivi*, ll. 74-76.

<sup>55</sup> *ivi*, ll. 85-86.

Ich have ygoven min owen dome.  
Forboden bite ich woman  
To speken ani other harm opon.  
Falsliche another y gan deme;  
The selve happe is on me sene.  
Allas," sche seyde, "that y was born!  
Withouten ende icham forlorn.  
Or ich mot siggen sikerly  
That tuay men han yly me by;  
Or ich mot sigge in al mi liif  
That y bileighe mi neighbours wiif;  
Or ich mot - that God it schilde! -  
Help to sle min owen child.  
On of this thre thinges ich mot nede  
Sigge other don in dede."<sup>56</sup>

Le Freine's mother's deceptive words have tangible repercussions. In stark contrast to the jealous mother's malicious gossip about her neighbour's prosperity at the lay's outset, we witness Le Freine's silent generosity towards Le Codre's good fortune at its 19<sup>th</sup>-century reconstructed conclusion:

Albe her herte wel nigh tobroke,  
No word of pride ne grame she spoke.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, as she prepares the wedding chamber, she discerns that its current appearance does not align with what would be deemed suitable for someone like Le Codre, whom Le Freine views as possessing admirable qualities, considering her upbringing and demeanour. Consequently, she takes her own luxurious embroidered cloth and drapes it over the bed.

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<sup>56</sup> *ivi*, ll. 89-104.

<sup>57</sup> *ivi*, ll. 353-354.



This discreet act of generosity, a gift from her modest inheritance, acts as a discreet manoeuvre that sets in motion the possibility of redemption for all parties involved. By relinquishing one of the few possessions that has provided her solace, namely the cloth, she unknowingly paves the way for her mother's reconciliation.

Her benevolence seems to be an inheritance from her father, evident as her acts of generosity mirror his response upon learning about the birth of the twin boys:

The knight therof was glad and blithe,

And thonked Godes sond swithe,

And graunted his erand in al thing,

And gaf him a palfray for his tiding.<sup>58</sup>

The textual construction of Le Freine's silence is noteworthy, especially considering her titular role. The narrative is crafted to amplify the voices of others, including her mother, father, the neighbour's messenger, the maiden transporting Le Freine to the convent, the abbess, Guroun, and his barons. Remarkably, Le Freine's voice remains silent or muted throughout the narrative until its 19<sup>th</sup>-century reconstructed conclusion. This section, crafted to provide an ending to the *Lay le Freine*, which lacks its original 14<sup>th</sup>-century conclusion, draws inspiration from the source text, Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*.

Notably, she does not directly speak in the text until her mother addresses her in the wedding chamber, a mere few lines from the story's end:

"Then answered that maiden fair:

"It is mine without lesing;

Y had it together with this ringe.

Myne aunte tolde me a ferli cas

Hou in this mantyll yfold I was,

And hadde upon mine arm this ring,

Whanne I was ysent to norysching."<sup>59</sup>

Le Freine's emergence into the narrative with a voice aligns seamlessly with her reclaiming of identity, heritage, and family, particularly her connection with her mother.

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<sup>58</sup> *ivi*, ll. 55-58.

<sup>59</sup> *ivi*, ll. 378-384.

As she steps into language, she also steps into roles within the realms of kinship, patrimony, and marriage. Essentially, her voice is intrinsically tied to the established social order; it manifests as she assumes her designated place within the societal structure.

### **2.3. The *Lay le Freine* and its companion lays**

In addition to conducting an individual thematic analysis of the *Lay le Freine*, it is imperative to present an overview of its correlations with other Middle English Breton lays such as *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Sir Launfal*, all housed within MS Auchinleck. This comparative exploration seeks to reveal shared themes, distinctive features, and potential influences, thereby enriching our comprehension of the *Lay le Freine* within the broader literary milieu of the manuscript.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the only copy we have of the *Lay le Freine* is extant in MS Auchinleck, ff.261ra-262vb. Unfortunately, ll. 121-133 are missing, and the narrative abruptly concludes after l. 340. This abrupt ending is attributed to gaps in the section of the manuscript where it is located, rendering it 'lacunose.' The manuscript's dating places it in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, while the composition of the poem itself falls between the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century and no later than 1330-40, coinciding with the manuscript's preparation. The writing of MS Auchinleck is an 'ante quem' because it could not have been composed after being transcribed. The *Lay le Freine*, alongside *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*, stands among the earliest lays composed in English.

As mentioned earlier, this cluster more faithfully captures the essence of the Breton orally sung tradition mentioned in the initial chapter of this thesis. In contrast, the subsequently written lays (*Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Sir Launfal*) tend to align with a tradition more commonly observed in other Middle English romances. At a mere 408 lines, the *Lay le Freine* holds the distinction of being the shortest among the seven Middle English Breton lays preserved in the MS Auchinleck too. It is worth mentioning that, in addition to the aforementioned Middle English Breton lays, the MS Auchinleck also includes *Sir Cleges*. While it is not typically categorized as a Middle English Breton lay, its presence in the manuscript is notable. The poem's focus on minstrels and

minstrelsy, a characteristic that several scholars have highlighted, led to its classification as a minstrel tale, making it an integral and distinctive feature of the narrative.<sup>60</sup>

Commonly posited as being written in octosyllabic couplets, the *Lay le Freine* shares this characteristic with *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*. However, it is acknowledged that not all lines strictly adhere to the eight-syllable count. In contrast, *Erle of Tolous*, *Sir Launfal*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Gowther* were crafted using tail-rhyme stanzas. In the case of the *Lay le Freine*, this particular Middle English Breton lay features a detailed prologue, strikingly identical to the one found in *Sir Orfeo*, another work present in the MS Auchinleck. The resemblance between the two passages is so remarkably close that any plausible explanation other than direct borrowing becomes untenable<sup>61</sup>. Below, a comparison between the prologue of the *Lay le Freine*:

“We redeth oft and findeth ywrite -  
And this clerkes wele it wite -  
Layes that ben in harping  
Ben yfounde of ferli thing.  
Sum bethe of wer 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 for sothe thai beth.  
In Breteyne bi hold time  
This layes were wrought, so seith this rime.  
When kinges might our yhere

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<sup>60</sup> Laskaya, Anne, and Eve Salisbury, “Sir Cleges: Introduction” in *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995).

<sup>61</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 132.

Of ani mervailles that ther were,  
Thai token an harp in gle and game,  
And maked a lay and gaf it name.  
Now of this aventours that weren yfalle,  
Y can tel sum ac nought alle."<sup>62</sup>

And the prologue found in *Sir Orfeo*:

“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 wer 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.  
In Breteyne this layes were wrought,  
First y-founde and forth y-brought,  
Of aventours that fel bi dayes,  
Wherof Bretouns maked her layes.  
When kinges might ovr y-here  
Of ani mervailles that ther were,

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<sup>62</sup> *Lay le Freine*, ll. 1-20.

Thai token an harp in gle and game

And maked a lay and gaf it name.

Now of this aventours that weren y-falle

Y can tel sum, ac nought alle."<sup>63</sup>

Given that Marie de France's original *Lai le Fresne* has its own two-line prologue, it is improbable that it served as the source for the Middle English Breton poem. The likelihood increases that the prologue originated from the lost *Lai d'Orphéy* and was subsequently transmitted during the translation process to *Sir Orfeo*.<sup>64</sup> Eventually, it found its way into the *Lay le Freine*, whose author displayed characteristics of both a translator and a borrower.

However, the evidence is not definitive enough to dismiss an alternative interpretation. Therefore, it is proposed that the English author of the *Lay le Freine*, who surpassed the role of a mere translator, crafted the prologue. In such a scenario, it is improbable that the prologue was created by the French author of the *Lai d'Orphéy*; instead, it implies an original composition in English.

Additionally, the author of the *Lay le Freine* demonstrates familiarity with the lays of Marie de France throughout the poem, while the author of *Sir Orfeo*, except for the prologue, exhibits no knowledge of her work. While the second interpretation is more complex and intricate compared to the first, it is not as convincing or persuasive. Despite this, this interpretation is considered solid or indisputable and cannot be easily challenged or refuted.<sup>65</sup>

Turning our attention to the thematic similarities among the lays in MS Auchinleck, a discernible connection emerges between the *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Degaré*. Examining thematic parallels between these two works from MS Auchinleck reveals significant connections. Both narratives share common motifs, such as the protagonists, Le Freine and Degaré, being abandoned at birth and later recognized by a parent through a distinctive token (an embroidered cloth in Le Freine's case and a sword with a missing tip in Degaré's case). Furthermore, considering the later addition of a reconstructed 68-line ending to the *Lay le Freine*, both narratives ultimately reach positive conclusions for all characters involved.

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<sup>63</sup> *Sir Orfeo*, ll. 1-22.

<sup>64</sup> Foulet Lucien, "The Prologue of *Sir Orfeo*", *Modern Language Notes* 21, No. 8 (Dec., 1906): 46-50.

<sup>65</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 133.

Despite these shared elements, the two characters' journeys unfold distinctly. Le Freine's life is shaped within a convent after being abandoned due to the societal stigma associated with her being the result of a twin birth, considered scandalous and shameful. In contrast, Degaré embarks on a quest involving chivalric trials, dragon encounters, and the quest to reclaim his identity and familial connections. Notably, while Le Freine's abandonment is tied to the secrecy of her twin birth, Degaré's origin is rooted in his mother's rape by a mysterious fairy knight in a forest, leading to a different trajectory in his narrative.

The differences in the life trajectories of Le Freine and Degaré can possibly be attributed to a combination of factors, including gender roles, societal norms, and the specific circumstances surrounding their backgrounds.

Firstly, gender roles played a significant role in shaping the characters' destinies. During the medieval period, societal expectations for men and women were distinct and strongly defined. Le Freine's narrative reflects the consequences of societal stigma associated with her twin birth, deemed scandalous in the context of societal norms for women. In contrast, Degaré, being a male character, embarks on chivalric adventures, aligning more closely with traditional male roles prevalent in medieval romances.

Societal norms and expectations further contributed to the divergent paths of Le Freine and Degaré. Le Freine's abandonment and subsequent life in a convent can be seen as a response to societal norms regarding women and childbirth. Her narrative illustrates the societal repercussions of deviating from established norms, particularly when it comes to women. On the other hand, Degaré's chivalric quest aligns with the expected roles for male protagonists, reflecting the influence of societal expectations on the characters' journeys.

Moreover, the specific circumstances surrounding the characters' origins played a crucial role in shaping their narratives. Le Freine's twin birth, considered scandalous, led to her abandonment and subsequent life within the confines of a convent. In contrast, Degaré's origin involves a mysterious encounter between his mother and a fairy knight, setting the stage for a unique and adventurous quest to reclaim his identity. The differing circumstances contribute to the distinct paths each character takes, adding complexity and richness to their individual stories.

Overall, the differences in Le Freine and Degaré's lives can be viewed as reflections of the gendered expectations and societal norms prevalent in medieval literature. The

characters' specific backgrounds and the circumstances surrounding their births further contribute to the diversity and intricacy of the medieval literary tradition.

Another Middle English Breton lay, namely *Emaré*, shares some elements with the *Lay le Freine* and they both feature female protagonists. Much like what happens in the *Lay le Freine*, *Emaré* centres on a heroine's suffering and endurance, portraying the protagonist as a model of Christ-like virtues. While adhering to a straightforward moral framework, the narrative introduces ambiguity, especially in relation to Emaré's enchanted robe, which serves as a symbol of love, beauty, and potential danger. The robe's complex history interweaves themes of love and violence, and scholars<sup>66</sup> interpret it differently, considering it a love-charm, a symbol of female puberty, or an image of order and civilization.

Le Freine's exquisite fabric serves as a constant companion throughout her life, traversing various identities and stages, from her birth to the poignant moment when her mother finally identifies her through this significant piece. This finely crafted cloth plays a pivotal and symbolic role in both the narrative and the evolution of Le Freine's character.

Similarly emphasized in the *Lay le Freine*, the lay highlights Emaré's passive endurance. Yet she subtly influences her world through disguises and off-stage directions, emphasizing her limited but impactful agency. The narrative concludes with a 'good catastrophe' and reinforces faith, persistence, and the ability to control one's destiny.

*Emaré* intertwines elements of romance (a focus on the family and the heroine's personal relationships, as well as threats against the heroine, often of a sexual nature, permeates the narrative), folklore (such as an accused queen, a monstrous birth, magic clothes, exchanged letters, an incestuous father, and a child who redeems its parents), and saintly legends (Emaré is seen as offering a model of Christ-like virtues, suffering for her allegiance to divine law in the face of human pressures, and she is portrayed as a figure near to being a secularized saint) contributing to the medieval tradition of tales featuring female protagonists facing adversity and asserting their subtle power in a patriarchal society.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Hanspeter Schelp, "Exemplarische Romanzen im Mittelenglischen", *Palaestra 246* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 113; Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: Routledge Revivals, 2011), 139.

<sup>67</sup> Joan Ferrante, "Public Postures and Private Maneuvers: Roles Medieval Women Play," in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (eds.), *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988): 213.

## 2.4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the look into the Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*, has given us a glimpse into its narrative complexities, themes, and connections within the MS Auchinleck. The exploration commenced by examining the unique characteristics of the lay, tracing its origins from Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*, and briefly noting the influence on the creation of Jean Renart's *Roman de Galeran de Bretagne* (although not discussed in this thesis). The examination of Le Freine's life journey revealed unexpected twists, romantic entanglements, and a fairy-tale ending that resonates with other Middle English Breton lays.

The exploration emphasized the frequent incorporation of literary motifs inspired by folklore. Additionally, assessments were made regarding the inclusion of religious and magical elements. The cultural significance of the lay was explored, accompanied by reflections on women's roles and virtues within the lay's contextual framework. Le Freine's silence emerged as a narrative device with profound implications, echoing societal norms and contributing to her gradual integration into the secular community.

Moreover, the chapter explored correlations with other Middle English Breton lays within the MS Auchinleck, with a particular emphasis on *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, and *Emaré*. Shared themes, distinctive features, and potential influences were identified, enriching our understanding of the *Lay le Freine* within the broader medieval literary milieu.

The lay's textual construction, notably the shared prologue with *Sir Orfeo*, hinted at English origins for the prologue, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the lays in the MS Auchinleck. Thematic similarities with other lays, such as *Sir Degaré*, highlighted shared motifs despite distinct narrative trajectories.

In essence, the *Lay le Freine* contributes to the cultural dialogue on themes of child abandonment, virtue, and the portrayal of women. Le Freine's journey, marked by patience and humility, signifies a shift from isolation to connection within her society. The lay's interconnectedness with other lays in MS Auchinleck adds layers to its significance in the broader medieval literary context.

This comprehensive analysis of the *Lay le Freine* has not only shed light on its distinct characteristics but has also provided a nuanced understanding of its thematic richness and its place within the intricate tapestry of Middle English Breton lays.



In the upcoming final chapter of this thesis, we will delve into a comparative analysis of the Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*. This section will meticulously explore both the distinctions and similarities between the two works, shedding light on their narrative nuances. Additionally, a dedicated portion of the chapter will focus on a detailed character analysis of the various personas within the *Lay le Freine*. Furthermore, the investigation will extend to the identification and examination of potential Celtic elements embedded in the lay, adding a layer of depth to our understanding of its cultural and literary influences.

## CHAPTER 3

### Le Freine vs. Le Fresne

#### 3.1. Introduction

In the preceding chapter, our examination centred on the *Lay le Freine*. The exploration involved a comprehensive look at the *Lay le Freine*, connecting it to Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*. Despite the *Lay le Freine*'s elusive authorship and physical damage, the analysis unravelled its plot intricacies and identified literary motifs. The chapter revisited Marie de France's introduction of diverse female characters, emphasizing thematic continuity. Exploring potential links with Middle English Breton lays, we found a significant correlation—the shared prologue between the *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*. This led to a comparative analysis, considering stylistic, temporal, and thematic parallels, supported by scholarly interpretations.

As we transition to the final chapter of this thesis, we carefully compare the Middle English Breton lay, the *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*. This analysis aims to highlight the differences and similarities in these literary works, revealing their storytelling variations. The forthcoming sections will dedicate attention to character analysis, providing insights into the personas found in the *Lay le Freine*. The investigation not only identifies and examines potential Celtic elements within the lay but also enhances our understanding of its cultural and literary context.

Our objective is to delve into the literary and cultural connections between the French source text, the *Lai le Fresne*; the Middle English lay, the *Lay le Freine*; and the Celtic world. We seek to address whether the anonymous English composer, possibly influenced by Marie de France's familiarity with Breton lays, had knowledge of the Celtic world through her or independently. Additionally, we aim to explore whether the English author's perception of a Breton lay is stereotypical or based on factual knowledge.

### 3.2. The *Lay le Freine* vs. The *Lai le Fresne*: a comparison

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the *Lay le Freine* is housed within folios 261a and 262a of MS Auchinleck. The *Lay le Freine* is acknowledged as a rendition of Marie de France's *Lais le Fresne*. As detailed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the 13<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a surge in the popularity of Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*, resulting in its growth and development into a broader Old French romance called the *Roman de Galeran de Bretagne* by Jean Renart. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the *Roman de Galeran de Bretagne* will not be explored further in this research, as it is not pertinent to the study's objectives.

The *Lay le Freine* is often described as being in the same tradition as the original,<sup>68</sup> employing octosyllabic couplets. However, it is worth noting that this characterization is made despite the observation that not every line strictly adheres to the eight-syllable count. When the term 'octosyllabic' or 'short couplets' is invoked, it should be understood in a nuanced manner, acknowledging that it implies a departure from the strict regularity observed in the corresponding French couplets.

In contemplating the conventional breakdown into feet, lines, and stanzas, the *Lay le Freine*'s versification reveals a propensity for taking liberties. Within its structure, one can discern up to four distinct types of couplets, introducing a level of variability that goes beyond the conventional end-stopped couplet commonly associated with octosyllabic verse. This variability adds a layer of complexity to the poem's rhythmic and metrical composition, contributing to its distinctive literary character.<sup>69</sup>

In the first case, the two lines within the couplet can maintain grammatical independence both from each other and from the adjacent couplets:

"'Is his levedi deliverd with sounde?"

"Ya, sir, ythonked be God the stounde.""<sup>70</sup>

In the second scenario, the initial verse can possess grammatical independence, while the second one is contextually linked with the subsequent verses:

"'Madame, what rede ye of this thing?

Today right in the morning,

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<sup>68</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis, *Mediæval romance in England: a study of the sources and analogues of the noncyclic metrical romances* (New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1963), 294.

<sup>69</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 128.

<sup>70</sup> *Lay le Freine*, ll. 51-52.

Sone after the first stounde,  
A litel maidenchild ich founde  
In the holwe assche ther out,  
And a pel him about."<sup>71</sup>

In the third instance, the grammatical association of the first verse within the couplet aligns with the preceding passage, whereas the second verse maintains its independence:

"Go," hye seyde, "on heighing,  
And feche it hider, y pray the.  
It is welcom to God and to me."<sup>72</sup>

In the fourth and final scenario, the grammatical alignment of the first verse within the couplet coincides with the preceding passage, while the second verse finds its grammatical connection with the subsequent passage:

"The maide toke the child hir mide  
And stale oway in an eventide,  
And passed over a wild heth.  
Thurch feld and thurch wode hye geth  
Al the winterlong night"<sup>73</sup>

The most prevalent type of couplet in the *Lay le Freine* is the common end-stopped couplet, of which I mentioned there are 48 examples of. However, among the additional types identified, it appears that the second scenario, where the initial verse possesses grammatical independence while the second one is contextually linked with the subsequent verses, is more common.

The *Lay le Freine* strategically employs end-stopped couplets and the second type of couplet to enhance the clarity and coherence of its narrative. End-stopped couplets provide a clear and concise presentation of ideas within each unit, contributing to an easily comprehensible structure. Simultaneously, the second type of couplet, where the initial verse maintains independence while being contextually linked to subsequent

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<sup>71</sup> *Ivi*, ll. 211-216.

<sup>72</sup> *Ivi*, ll. 220-222.

<sup>73</sup> *Ivi*, ll. 145-149.

verses, ensures a linear progression of ideas, fostering continuity and coherence. This combination achieves a balanced narrative flow, smoothly transitioning between self-contained thoughts and interconnected elements. The stylistic choices not only prioritize clarity but also align with the aesthetic preferences and medieval literary traditions of the lay's composition. In essence, these syntactic patterns represent a deliberate and effective approach to crafting a narrative that is both lucid and artistically in line with the medieval literary context.

Another instance within the lay that aligns with this pattern, where the first verse maintains grammatical independence while the second is contextually linked with the subsequent verses, is:

"The maiden abod no lengore,  
Bot yede hir to the chirche dore,  
And on knes sche sat adoun,  
And seyd wepeand her orisoun:  
'O Lord,' she seyde, 'Jesu Crist,  
That sinful man bedes herst,  
Underfong this present,  
And help this seli innocent  
That it mot yristned be,  
For Marie love, thi moder fre.'"<sup>74</sup>

In this example, the first line, "The maiden abod no lengore," can stand independently, and the second line, "Bot yede hir to the chirche dore," is contextually linked with the subsequent verses, continuing the narrative. This type of couplet, where the first line stands somewhat independently, and the second line connects contextually with the following verses, is utilized throughout the *Lay le Freine*, appearing in at least 5 instances.

After calculating the frequency of the two most common couplet types, it can be concluded that, in the *Lay le Freine*, around 14.12% of the couplets belong to Type 1, while approximately 1.47% fall into Type 2. This analysis highlights the prevalence of Type 1, significantly surpassing Type 2 in frequency within the lay.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ivi*, ll. 163-172.

Additional distinctions between this poem and its source material directly indicate the translator's interpretation of the Middle English Breton lay as a literary form, a point illuminated in the prologues of both the *Lai le Fresne* and the *Lay le Freine*.

The prologue of the *Lai le Fresne* is quite short:

“Le lai del Fraisne vus dirai  
sulunc le cunte que jeo sai.”<sup>75</sup>

In contrast, the Middle English rendition features an intricate prologue that, divided into three sections, expounds upon the genre of the *Lay le Freine*:

“We redeth oft and findeth ywrite -  
And this clerkes wele it wite -  
Layes that ben in harping  
Ben yfounde of ferli thing.

Sum bethe of wer 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 for sothe thai beth.

In Breteyne bi hold time  
This layes were wrought, so seith this rime.  
When kinges might our yhere  
Of ani mervailles that ther were,

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<sup>75</sup> *Lai le Fresne*, ll. 1-2 (“I will tell you the lay of the Ash,|According to the tale that I know.”).

Thai token an harp in gle and game,

And maked a lay and gaf it name.

Now of this aventours that weren yfalle,

Y can tel sum ac nought alle."<sup>76</sup>

As seen in lines 1-4, the narrator describes the Middle English Breton lay as recognized in written form, accompanied harmoniously by a harp. The original Breton lays were likely intended to be sung orally with instrumental accompaniment, particularly the harp, closely associated with the Celtic musical tradition of the Bretons. In the first chapter, we highlighted scholars like Baugh suggesting that the Middle English Breton lays exhibit a musical meter and rhythm, possibly reflecting the minstrels' tradition of narrating tales to an audience.

Moreover, as we previously mentioned, Marie de France takes inspiration from the Celtic tradition, adapting orally delivered narratives into written compositions that adhere to Romance literature conventions—metrical, linguistic, thematic, and related to narrative structure. This could offer further evidence that the Middle English author similarly followed this practice, either directly drawing from the Celtic tradition or from Marie de France's works, which are evidently influenced by it.

Between lines 5 and 12, the narrative underscores that the primary theme of the lay revolves around love in its various forms. In our earlier thesis chapter, we argued that love is a central theme in Marie de France's *Lais*, intricately intertwined with human freedom of choice. Despite not always leading to blissful conclusions, her narratives consistently share a common motif: the predestined union of two lovers guided by destiny, and the *Lay le Freine* aligns with this pattern.

The author of the *Lay le Freine* explicitly addresses the theme in these lines, unlike Marie de France in the prologue of her *Lai le Fresne*. This suggests that the Middle English audience might not have been familiar with the thematic implications of this specific narrative style, unlike Marie de France's audience. It also implies that the Middle English author learned about this narrative style through Marie de France's poems and felt the need to provide guidelines for a fuller understanding.

As mentioned in the first chapter, distinctions in the theme of 'love' exist: Marie de France's *Lais* focus on courtly love, portraying arranged marriages and the pursuit of

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<sup>76</sup> *Lay le Freine*, ll. 1-20.

happiness beyond them. In contrast, Middle English Breton lays depict the culmination of lovers' stories in marriage, presenting it as the ultimate path to happiness rather than an escape from societal expectations. This distinction arises from the lovers' active choice, unlike arranged marriages dictated by society, as exemplified in the *Lay le Freine*.

Continuing from line 13 to 20, the text clarifies that the lay originated in ancient Brittany and transcended its geographical boundaries, recounting an adventure chronicled in rhymed form that reflects a narrative from the relatively 'recent past.' This hints at the author's potentially idealized and distant perception of the Celtic world, bordering on the fantastical. It suggests that the author's understanding of the Celtic realm may have been shaped more by literary narratives, such as those of Marie de France, rather than direct engagement with the culture, constituting more of a literary construct than a first-hand experience.

However, with the exception of its prologue, which deviates significantly from that of the *Lai le Fresne*, the Middle English Breton poem retains a close connection to its source. From a narrative perspective, the notable distinctions in plot and style are minimal, confined to intentional modifications of the storyline and selective additions and omissions.

Commencing with alterations in specific details, noteworthy changes include: 1) Shifting the setting from Brittany<sup>77</sup> to England;<sup>78</sup> 2) Entrusting the task of killing the child to a midwife<sup>79</sup> instead of those present in the room;<sup>80</sup> 3) Locating Guroun's residence in the west of England<sup>81</sup> rather than in Dol;<sup>82</sup> 4) Explicitly stating Guroun's intention to have Le Freine as his mistress,<sup>83</sup> a detail only suggested in the source; 5) Designating a bishop,<sup>84</sup> not an archbishop, as the clergyman responsible for dissolving the marriage; 6) Introducing the abbess's revelation to Le Freine about her foundling status during adolescence,<sup>85</sup> whereas in the source, this revelation occurs later with less consideration for its impact on characterization.

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<sup>77</sup> *Lai le Fresne*, ll. 3-4: "En Bretagne jadis maneient dui chevalier; veisin esteient.", ("In Brittany in the past, lived two knights; they were neighbours.").

<sup>78</sup> "In the west cuntré woned tuay knightes", *Lay le Freine*, l. 29.

<sup>79</sup> "Hir midwiif hye cleped hir to", *ivi*, l. 115.

<sup>80</sup> "Celes ki en la chambre esteient", *ivi*, l. 95.

<sup>81</sup> "Than was ther in that cuntré", *ivi*, l. 251.

<sup>82</sup> *Lai le Fresne*, l. 253: "A Dol aveit un bon seignur", ("In Dol, there was a good lord.").

<sup>83</sup> "To have hir to his leman.", *Lay le Freine*, l. 272.

<sup>84</sup> "The bischop of the lond withouten fail", *ivi*, l. 339.

<sup>85</sup> "A litel maidenchild ich founde/In the holwe assche ther out,/And a pel him about./[...]/ And ther whiles sche lived so sche dede.", *ivi*, ll. 215-250.



Among the noticeable changes, the most apparent is the shift in setting from Brittany in the original source, Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*, to England in the Middle English Breton lay horizontal translation. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the Middle English Breton lays narrate tales of individuals from Britain who lived in an ancient past, distinct from contemporary Bretons residing in Brittany. Despite sharing a common cultural and genealogical heritage, these two groups maintain unique identities. The deliberate use of the historical rivalry between France and Britain in the Middle English Breton lays serves to bring them into focus and aligns with a cultural claim agenda, echoing the approach taken by various 12<sup>th</sup>-century authors, including Marie de France.

Consequently, it is plausible to argue that English poets and writers directed their focus toward an English-speaking audience, aligning with cultural themes and better connecting with the public. Furthermore, point 3 underscores that Sir Guroun's residence is situated in the West of England, deviating from the original placement in Dol.

In the preceding chapters of this thesis, we emphasized the sociological perspective, revealing that the thematic elements in the French *Lais* offer a profound reflection on both personal and societal identities, intricately mirroring the historical context of the time. Folktales, as cultural artefacts, often function as projections of the social realities from which they originate, providing a lens through which the general population can scrutinize their world.

One predominant theme in Marie de France's works is love, specifically 'courtly love'. This conception of love is characterized by its clandestine nature, with relationships veiled in secrecy, thus idealizing a form of love that is both destructive and emotionally taxing. However, Marie de France modifies some of its typical characteristics, such as subservience and devotion to the most affluent and high-ranking lady at court.

Point 4 draws attention to Sir Guroun's explicit intention to have Le Freine as his mistress, a departure from the source that only suggests the relationship. It is reasonable to speculate that this difference stems from the Middle English author's exposure to distinct customs and cultural elements, influencing the portrayal and translation of human relationships in their works. Additionally, the *Lai le Fresne* was composed in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, in contrast to the *Lay le Freine*, which emerged in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. This not only underscores a different, albeit related, country but also a different temporal context.

Similarly, the theme of secrecy enveloping human relationships due to societal expectations may align with the fact that Le Freine discovers her foundling status during

adolescence. In contrast, the source unveils this revelation later, showing less consideration for its impact on characterization, as emphasized in point 6.

Point 5 highlights that it is a bishop instead of an archbishop, like in the original source, to dissolve the marriage between Sir Guroun and Le Codre. The change in the authority figure dissolving the marriage from an archbishop in the original source to a bishop in the Middle English Breton lay could be attributed to the adaptability of the narrative to its cultural and linguistic context.

In the Middle Ages, the ecclesiastical hierarchy varied, and the roles and powers of bishops and archbishops could differ across regions. The Middle English author might have chosen a bishop instead of an archbishop to align with the ecclesiastical structure or norms more prevalent in England during their time. Additionally, the choice could be influenced by the author's creative interpretation and the narrative needs of the Middle English version. Nevertheless, further inquiries are required to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena indicated by these hypotheses.

Examining the additional elements introduced into the narrative, notable observations include: 1) The characterization of the mother of the twin boys as 'milde', establishing a contrast with her jealous and spiteful neighbour;<sup>86</sup> 2) The English version provides specificity to adultery by situating it 'in bour';<sup>87</sup> 3) The neighbouring knight, in a curse upon his wife, invokes God to mete out a 'wers auentour' if she ever bears a child;<sup>88</sup> 4) The presence of a messenger during the jealous wife's emotional outburst, described as being 'sore aschamed';<sup>89</sup> 5) The poet, in detailing the maid's flight with infant Le Freine, introduces a sense of time passage, dramatizes and intensifies the challenges, and enhances the atmospheric elements;<sup>90 91</sup> 6) The English rendition includes a description of dawn;<sup>92</sup> 7) The duties of the porter are expanded to encompass his responsibilities of managing 'forth bokes and al redi dight.'; 8) The translation interprets *freine* as signifying

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<sup>86</sup> "That o knight made his levedi milde", *Lay le Freine*, line 33.

<sup>87</sup> "Wele may ich man wite therefore/That tuay men hir han hadde in bour;|That is hir bothe deshonor.", *ivi*, ll. 70-72.

<sup>88</sup> "And ich woman therof might here|Cursed hir alle yfere,|And bisought God in heven|For His holy name seven|That yif hye ever ani child schuld abide|A wers aventour hir schuld bitide.", *ivi*, ll. 77-82.

<sup>89</sup> "The messenger was sore aschamed", *ivi*, l. 73.

<sup>90</sup> "The maide toke the child hir mide|And stale oway in an eventide,|And passed over a wild heth.|[...]|To servy God bothe day and night.", *ivi*, ll. 145-162.

<sup>91</sup> *Lai le Fresne*, ll. 135-150: "La dameisele prist l'enfant;|de la chambre s'en ist a tant.|[...]|En une vile riche e bele|est entree la dameisele.", ("The maiden took the child; from the chamber, she went away so much. [...] Into a rich and beautiful town,|the maiden entered.").

<sup>92</sup> "With that it gan to dawe light.|The foules up and song on bough,|And acremen yede to the plough.", *Lay le Freine*, ll. 180-182.

ash in the French language;<sup>93</sup> 9) During Guroun's plea for Le Freine to leave the abbey with him, the English poet notes her trust in him.<sup>94</sup>

In examining the additional elements incorporated into the narrative, the first notable aspect is the characterization of the mother of the twin boys as 'milde,' a quality that sets her apart from her jealous and spiteful neighbour, as emphasized in point 1. In the Middle English version, the contrast between the mother of the twin boys being described as 'milde' (mild or gentle) and her neighbour as jealous and spiteful serves to highlight the dichotomy between virtue and vice.

The characterization of the mother as mild emphasizes her positive qualities, portraying her as kind, gentle, and perhaps more virtuous. This contrast helps to underscore the negative traits of the jealous and spiteful neighbour, emphasizing the moral aspects of the characters and contributing to the moral and didactic elements often present in medieval literature. Additionally, such characterizations can be employed to reinforce societal norms and expectations, encouraging readers to embrace virtues and avoid vices.

In point 3, the neighbouring knight, Le Freine's father, invokes God to mete out a 'wers auentour' (a worse fate), expressing intense dissatisfaction, anger, or disappointment with his wife's actions. By seeking divine intervention for a more unfavourable destiny, he underscores the gravity of her perceived transgressions, indicating a desire for severe consequences. This curse reveals a deep emotional response and moral judgment, emphasizing the seriousness of the situation and its impact on their relationship.

This duality in women's characters is further highlighted when contrasting Le Freine's mother with the adult Le Freine, who becomes an exemplar of virtuous maidenhood. The neighbouring men are portrayed as fair, just, and rightful, aligning with a common literary trend where male characters often embody heroism and moral virtue. This portrayal serves to juxtapose vices versus virtues and underscores a thematic emphasis on divine justice, symbolized by God's role.

Point 4 highlights the presence of the messenger as a witness to the knight's fair nature, representing justice and contrasting with the conniving nature of his wife. This juxtaposition reinforces the narrative's exploration of virtues and vices, contributing to

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<sup>93</sup> "(The Freyns of the "asche" is a freyn |After the language of Breteyn;|Forthe Le Frein men clepeth this lay|More than Asche in ich cuntray)", *Lay le Freine*, ll. 231-234.

<sup>94</sup> "The maiden grant, and to him trist", *ivi*, l. 297.

the overarching theme of divine justice. The eventual birth of twins to Le Freine's mother adds a layer of irony, underscoring the consequences of her earlier actions.

Points 5 and 6 delve into the poet's storytelling decisions, examining how events are detailed, time passage is conveyed, challenges are dramatized, atmospheric elements are intensified, and phenomena are described to set scenes. The poet's vivid and dramatic depiction of the maid's journey with infant Le Freine in the Middle English version serves multiple narrative purposes. Firstly, the portrayal of time's passage adds dynamism, emphasizing the duration and challenges faced during the journey and enhancing overall narrative pacing.

The dramatization of hardships intensifies emotional impact, eliciting empathy from the audience and making the characters' plight more palpable. Additionally, the inclusion of atmospheric elements, such as clear weather, moonlight, and natural sounds, immerses the audience in the story's surroundings, contributing to a sensory-rich experience. In essence, these narrative choices not only resonate emotionally with the audience, foster suspense, and enhance the lay's aesthetic quality but also likely reflect both the author's distinctive writing style and the prevalent storytelling techniques of the time.

Point 8 highlights that the Middle English version offers an interpretation of *freine* as signifying ash in the French language. This may be an effort to provide clarity or convey additional meaning to the audience. Since *freine* in Middle English can be ambiguous, offering a translation or interpretation could help readers or listeners better understand the significance of the name. Additionally, it adds a layer of linguistic play or exploration, showcasing the author's engagement with language and potentially enhancing the thematic elements related to the ash tree in the narrative.

Examining the deliberate exclusions in the narrative, noteworthy points include: 1) In the scenario where the jealous wife gives birth to twin daughters, the English poet neglects to mention the neighbour's satisfaction and vindication;<sup>95</sup> 2) The English version omits any reference to Le Freine's courtly breeding;<sup>96</sup> 3) The poet skips over Guroun's 'casual' encounter with Le Freine, where, in the French text, he instructs his men to truthfully say that he is heading towards a tournament as he makes his way to the abbey. In the French version, he stops by on his return from the tournament;<sup>97</sup> 4) The English

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<sup>95</sup> *Lai le Fresne*, l. 68: "ore est sa veisine vengiee!", ("Now, her neighbor is avenged!").

<sup>96</sup> *Ivi*, l. 361: "Franche esteit e de bone escole", ("She was frank and of good education.").

<sup>97</sup> *Ivi*, l. 480: "A un torneiement ala", ("He went to a tournament.").

rendition leaves out the reason behind Guroun's encouragement to take a wife, which, in the source text, is to secure an heir and prevent the potential for civil disorder.

Moving on to the omissions in the *Lay le Freine* compared to the *Lai le Fresne*, point 1 notes that when the jealous wife gives birth to twin daughters, the English poet does not mention the neighbour's satisfaction and vindication. As discussed in points 3 and 4 of the 'additions' section, the neighbouring knight, Le Freine's father, expresses intense dissatisfaction with his wife's actions, attempting to spread harmful gossip about the neighbor knight's wife who had just given birth to twin boys. His disappointment reflects a deep emotional response and moral judgment, underscoring the gravity of the situation.

We also explored how both he and the neighbour, along with the messenger present, and the 'milde' wife of the neighbour embody virtue while the wife portrays vice. When the spiteful woman gives birth to twin girls herself, showcasing the power of divine justice, the author likely omits stating that the neighbour's felt his wife was avenged, as seen in the source text, to maintain the narrative flow.

Point 2 draws attention to the omission in the *Lay le Freine*, where there is no reference to Le Freine's courtly breeding. The absence of mention regarding her courtly upbringing might be a deliberate choice by the English poet to streamline the narrative or focus on other aspects of Le Freine's character. This decision could also align with a shift in cultural or literary preferences, with the Middle English version emphasizing different elements of the story that resonate more with its intended audience or reflect the author's creative choices.

The alterations in the *Lay le Freine* stem from the translation and modernization process. The translator opted for the Middle English short couplet, the closest available meter to the original. An extended prologue was introduced to offer more insights into the Breton lay tradition. Shifting the setting from Brittany to the western part of England aimed to enhance the story's relatability for the local audience. Stylistically, the translator enhanced the narrative with more vivid language and colourful descriptions. Notably, the omission of references to Le Freine's courtly breeding suggests a focus on creating a readable story for a diverse audience, prioritizing relatability over emphasizing courtly conduct. These adjustments were most probably made to align the tale with the linguistic, cultural, and stylistic preferences of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century audience.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 139.

### 3.3. Characters and motifs

Transitioning to a concise examination of characters and an overview of prevailing literary themes within the narrative of the *Lay le Freine*, it is important to revisit the content presented in the second chapter of this thesis. Within that section, an explanation was provided regarding a selection of characters and their respective roles, alongside a discourse on the principal motifs that permeate the storyline. This initial discussion provides a basis for delving deeper into the characters and themes of the *Lay le Freine*.

The *Lay le Freine* intricately weaves a captivating narrative that interlaces themes of love, fate, and identity through a diverse cast of characters. This exploration delves into the subtleties of each character, unravelling their roles, motivations, and the underlying thematic currents that contribute to shaping the narrative.

Central to the narrative is Sir Guroun, a proud and affluent knight driven by the pursuit of love. His character encapsulates the societal norms of his era, wherein he seeks a wife not merely to satisfy personal desires but also to fulfil his duty of perpetuating his lineage. The intersection of his path with Le Freine, the main protagonist, results in their destinies becoming intricately entwined, laying the groundwork for a story with elements of mystery and emotion.

Le Freine, discovered as an infant nestled in an ash tree, evolves into a symbol of virtue and obedience throughout the lay. Her trajectory from a cryptic origin to becoming the focal point of Sir Guroun's affection serves as a conduit for delving into the overarching themes of fate and identity. The narrative unfolds by tracing Le Freine's life story. Born under circumstances that led to her abandonment in an ash tree, her fate takes a turn when a porter coincidentally discovers her. This chance encounter becomes pivotal, emphasizing the theme of fate, as the story could have unfolded differently without his intervention.

Fate further intertwines with Sir Guroun's romantic interest, initially directed towards Le Codre, who, unbeknownst to him, happens to be Le Freine's twin sister from whom she was separated at birth. The theme of fate is reinforced when Sir Guroun ultimately encounters Le Freine at the convent. Additionally, the theme of identity is explored as Le Fraine, initially unaware of her origins, later discovers and reconnects with her familial roots. Throughout the narrative, Le Freine's character grapples with

challenges that not only test her perseverance but also contribute to shaping her into a heroine with a compelling narrative arc.

Le Codre, Le Freine's identical twin sister, introduces an additional layer to the narrative, contributing to the intricate web of destinies woven throughout the lay. Her fate becomes deeply entwined with that of Le Freine, imparting a poignant resolution to the narrative. Originating from a common lineage yet subjected to disparate upbringings, the sisters navigate their interconnected fates in a compelling exploration of familial bonds. The lay accentuates their profound connection, underscoring the significance of familial ties and the profound impact of shared destinies.

Examining the names of the twin sisters in the Lay le Freine reveals an intriguing aspect — they both possess meanings in Celtic tradition. Interestingly, the Middle English author chose not to translate the names of the twin sisters into English. This decision is particularly noteworthy because there is a passage in the lay, mentioned earlier in this thesis, where he explicitly states that the protagonist's name, Ash (from Old French *fresne*), means *asche* in English. The translation of Le Codre's name is found in the conclusion of the lay<sup>99</sup>, reconstructed by a modern critic using Marie's version.

Delving into Celtic traditions, the ash tree, known as *uinnseann* in Gaelic, holds cultural and mythological significance. It is perceived as protective, especially near holy wells, and associated with child health. The naming of new-borns and healing ceremonies involving ash trees reflect a belief in a connection between the tree's well-being and the individual's health. British folklore further attributes protective and healing properties to the ash tree.<sup>100</sup> It is conceivable that the author's stylistic decision to retain the original names in French, accompanied by concise English descriptions instead of direct translation, serves to emphasize the precedence of the French source text over the Celtic substrate.

In the broader context, the ash tree can symbolize strength, tenacity, and the interconnectedness of all things. The discovery of Le Freine in an ash tree in the *Lay le Freine* may carry symbolic meaning, potentially tied to themes of protection, destiny, or a mystical connection.

As for 'Le Codre', which means 'hazel tree', the Celts viewed hazelnuts as symbolic of concentrated wisdom and poetic inspiration. This connection is reflected in Gaelic,

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<sup>99</sup> "And Le Codre "hazle," y-wis", *Lay le Freine*, l. 348.

<sup>100</sup> Jacqueline M. Paterson, *Tree Wisdom: The definitive guidebook to the myth, folklore and healing power of Trees* (London: Thorsons, 1997).

where *cno* for hazelnuts is akin to *cnocach* for wisdom. Legend tells of nine hazel trees surrounding a sacred pool, dropping nuts for salmon, signifying absorbed wisdom. The Gaelic term *Coll* is prevalent in Scottish place names, such as Isle of Coll and Bar Calltuin in Appin. Clan Colquhoun, whose badge is the hazel, exemplifies this association. The English name derives from *haesel knut* in Anglo-Saxon, where *haesel* refers to the cap of leaves on hazelnuts. Hazel wood, valued for its flexibility, has been traditionally used for staffs in rituals, medieval defence, pilgrim staffs, and shepherds' crooks.<sup>101</sup>

In the preceding chapter, we highlighted that Le Freine, despite her initial lack of awareness regarding Le Codre's identity as her twin sister and even after marrying Sir Guroun in her sister's place, held the belief that she inspired admiration from Le Codre. This perception could be connected to the symbolic qualities associated with the hazel tree, represented by the meaning of Le Codre's name, reflecting notions of 'wisdom and poetic inspiration' in Celtic culture.

The abbess, a sagacious and nurturing figure within the convent where Le Freine finds refuge, assumes a pivotal role in guiding and safeguarding the protagonist. Her character serves to emphasize the significance of mentorship and the nurturing environment in moulding Le Freine's moral compass. Moreover, the abbess introduces a religious layer to the narrative, connecting the characters to broader societal and cultural dimensions.

The religious layer weaves the characters' experiences into the fabric of prevailing beliefs, connecting them with broader societal and cultural dimensions. The abbess, representing religion, reveals the mysteries of their birth, intertwining these events with societal norms and values influenced by religious beliefs. Through storytelling, the abbess connects the characters to the wider cultural context, infusing their actions with meaning shaped by the community's religious and cultural forces.

Acting as a sagacious storyteller in both the English and source texts, she unravels the mysteries surrounding the sisters' birth, also enriching the narrative with cultural and familial context. While in the source text, this revelation occurs later with less emphasis on its impact on characterization compared to the English version, where Le Freine learns about her foundling status during adolescence. In the reconstructed ending of the Middle English Breton lay, it is also suggested that Le Freine first heard about her foundling

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<sup>101</sup> Jacqueline M. Paterson, *Tree Wisdom: The definitive guidebook to the myth, folklore and healing power of Trees* (London: Thorsons, 1997).



origins from her aunt<sup>102</sup>. The abbess thus becomes a key figure, weaving together spiritual, cultural, and familial threads within the fabric of the lay.

Le Freine's and Le Codre's mother introduces elements of envy and pride into the narrative, creating conflict and misunderstanding. Her actions serve as catalysts for the complications that unfold in the story. Through her character, the lay delves into societal expectations and the complexities of interpersonal relationships, providing a nuanced exploration of medieval norms.

The *Lay le Freine* explores societal expectations around family, lineage, and social status. The mother's envy and pride highlight the pressures and conflicts arising from the desire for noble lineage. The lay delves into the complexities of familial relationships, especially the tension between biological and adoptive connections. It examines societal norms dictating acceptable behaviour, shedding light on the emotional intricacies and societal expectations that influence the characters' decisions. The mother's role adds layers to the narrative, revealing the intricacies of human emotions and the societal pressures that shape the characters' actions and choices.

Other characters, including the porter, the bishop, and the maiden's father, contribute to the rich tapestry of the narrative. The porter's crucial role in discovering Le Freine in the ash tree initiates the entire story, highlighting the importance of both chance and fate. The encounter with new-born Le Freine hidden in the ash tree was purely accidental, known only to the one who left her there. If the porter hadn't noticed and rescued the baby, the story would have taken a different, or perhaps non-existent, path.

The bishop's involvement adds a religious dimension to the lay, connecting it to broader cultural and spiritual contexts, deepening the thematic layers. The bishop's presence in the story not only adds a religious dimension, tying the lay to broader cultural and spiritual contexts, but also plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Beyond serving as a representative of the religious institution, the bishop contributes to the narrative's depth by connecting it to the cultural and spiritual fabric of the time.

His involvement is not merely symbolic; he plays a crucial part in formalizing significant events, such as the christening of Le Freine. This inclusion might suggest that the anonymous author adhered to Roman Catholicism, the predominant religion in 14<sup>th</sup> century England before the later break from the Catholic Church in 1534. In essence, the

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<sup>102</sup> "Myne aunte tolde me a ferli cas", *Lay le Freine*, l. 381.

bishop's character enriches the overall narrative, reinforcing societal and cultural dimensions woven into the fabric of the *Lay le Freine*.

In the reconstructed ending of the Middle English version, the maiden's father, upon being reunited with his unknown daughter, emerges as a character of depth and his joy and unquestioning acceptance of her return in his life illustrate a steadfast refusal to succumb to malignant gossip, highlighting his integrity. This portrayal challenges societal superstitions and norms, suggesting that he would never have abandoned either of his daughters based on unfounded beliefs. His character becomes a beacon of rationality and love in the face of societal pressures and misconceptions.

Including the reconstructed part of the *Lay le Freine* in this analysis is crucial for a few reasons. Firstly, it gives a more complete view of the whole story, allowing for a thorough examination of the lay. Despite being added in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the reconstructed part attempts to fill in missing pieces, offering insights into how later writers interpreted the original work.

Additionally, recognizing the reconstructed part in this analysis adds transparency to the research, informing readers about the *Lay le Freine's* composite nature. It allows for a discussion of the challenges and considerations tied to working with a text that underwent later interventions, contributing to a more multi-faceted interpretation of the lay's complexities. In essence, including the reconstructed part enhances this exploration of the *Lay le Freine* by offering a more complete narrative and being transparent about the historical layers of the text.

The narrative intricately explores themes of love, relationships, identity, and origin. The complex interplay of romantic entanglements and societal expectations mirrors medieval norms. Underlying currents of fate and redemption guide characters through challenges, leading to resolution. The story delves into the nuanced nature of human connections, revealing the multifaceted aspects of love and the transformative power of redemption amid societal expectations. Through the characters' journeys, the lay prompts reflection on the enduring interplay between fate, love, and the quest for self-discovery.

Expanding upon the insights from the preceding chapter, the *Lay le Freine* unveils a rich tapestry of literary motifs, adding layers of complexity to its narrative fabric. One prominent motif is the occurrence of twin birth, exemplified through the characters of Le Freine and Le Codre, whose intertwined destinies underscore the interconnectedness of

their lives. The theme of the abandoned or exposed child further deepens the narrative, as seen in *Le Freine's* poignant beginning, left by her mother at birth and symbolizing themes of vulnerability and fate.

The deployment of tokens facilitating recognition and identity establishment is a recurring motif. The blanket, featured in the reconstructed ending of the *Lay le Freine*, originally left with infant *Le Freine*, plays a crucial role, facilitating her mother's eventual recognition. This motif not only emphasizes the significance of material objects in establishing connections but also underscores the thematic exploration of identity and familial ties.

The *Lay le Freine* also features the transformative motif of a seemingly degraded individual ascending to nobility. *Le Freine* herself embodies this motif, as her humble beginnings contrast sharply with her eventual elevation. This narrative choice adds depth to the exploration of societal expectations, virtue, and the transformative power of personal.

Another pervasive motif is the theme of endurance being rewarded, a theme underscored by *Le Freine's* lasting humility and kindness. This motif aligns with broader medieval ideals of virtue and moral fortitude, showcasing how overcoming challenges with grace can lead to eventual reward and recognition.

### **3.4. Celtic elements**

Shifting our attention to the potential presence of Celtic elements in the *Lay le Freine*, it is crucial to revisit the discussion in the second chapter of this thesis. In that section, we emphasized that Marie de France, the author of the original *Lai le Fresne* from which the *Lay le Freine* is derived, draws inspiration from the rich Celtic tradition. The term 'derives' aligns with the method we previously discussed in this thesis as 'horizontal translation'.

Marie de France skilfully transforms narratives originally intended for oral delivery into written compositions that seamlessly align with the conventions of Romance literature. These conventions encompass metrical aspects, linguistic nuances, thematic elements, and narrative structures. This adept creation by Marie de France strongly suggests her thoughtful incorporation of Celtic elements as a source of inspiration for her literary endeavours.

As previously discussed, the connection between the Breton lays and the Celtic world is deeply rooted, both culturally and linguistically. The Bretons, descendants of the inhabitants of Britain who migrated following the invasion by the Angles and Saxons in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, continued to speak Breton. This linguistic continuity established a profound link to the Celtic world. Similar to the inhabitants of Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and Ireland, the Bretons maintained a keen interest in Celtic stories, fostering a cultural affinity.

The dissemination of Breton lays to the courts of France and beyond further strengthens the argument that Marie de France drew inspiration from the Celtic tradition in her literary works. This cultural exchange facilitated the transmission of Celtic narratives and motifs, contributing to the rich tapestry of the Breton lays. Marie de France's engagement with these tales reflects not only her literary prowess but also her deliberate inclusion of Celtic elements, thus attesting to the enduring influence of Celtic traditions in the composition of her works.

Building upon this observation, it is essential to note that the Bretons, despite being Celtic speakers from a linguistic standpoint, did not always identify themselves explicitly as such. Nevertheless, the Breton lays, crafted by individuals with Celtic linguistic roots, undeniably belong to the broader Celtic tradition.

The significance of this lies in the fact that certain Breton lays, including the *Lay le Freine*, are considered English renditions of earlier French Breton lays. This assertion underscores the enduring influence of Celtic traditions in the development and transmission of these narratives. The acknowledgment of these lays as part of the Celtic tradition reaffirms the cultural and linguistic continuity that persisted among the Bretons and highlights the interconnectedness of Celtic influences across linguistic and geographic boundaries.

Within Marie de France's *Lais*, the predominant narrative unfolds in a realistic context, with magic playing a secondary role. Its primary function lies in highlighting the hypocrisy within courtly society and emphasizing the injustices faced by the protagonists. The central themes revolve around justice and love, where magic is depicted as both a redemptive and destructive force, highlighting the interconnectedness between the otherworldly and human spheres.

Throughout the *Lais*, magical elements serve as bearers of joy and formidable adversaries against cruelty and injustice. They act as agents of retribution, punishing those

who transgress the bounds of love. The interplay between the supernatural and human realms mirrors a thematic alignment, underscoring the transformative and moral dimensions of magical interventions in the characters' lives.

This subsection inquires of whether the *Lay le Freine*, as a rendition of Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*, incorporates these Celtic elements. The affirmative response is supported, revealing the persistence of these elements in both the Middle English adaptation and its source, the *Lai le Fresne*.

The *Lay le Freine* exhibits elements that resonate with the Celtic tradition, drawing upon themes and motifs commonly found in Celtic storytelling. It incorporates several elements that resonate with Celtic mythology, contributing to a narrative rich in magical and mystical undertones. The foundling theme, prevalent in Celtic mythologies and also in various mythologies and folklore across different cultures, initiates the story with the discovery of a child, Le Freine, in an unconventional setting—an ash tree. This motif aligns with the Celtic tradition of weaving narratives around individuals found in mysterious circumstances, adding an element of enchantment to the tale.

As mentioned earlier, the foundling theme is a recurring motif found in diverse mythologies and folklore worldwide. For instance, in Roman mythology, the iconic founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, represent abandoned twins nurtured by a she-wolf. Similarly, Greek mythology recounts the tale of Amphion and Zethus, twins forsaken by their mother and subsequently discovered and cared for by a compassionate shepherd.

The introduction of the ash tree as Le Freine's birthplace serves as a conduit for magical elements within the narrative. As previously mentioned in this chapter, in Celtic lore, trees bear symbolic and magical significance, and their inclusion in tales is not uncommon. The choice of an ash tree, therefore, aligns with the Celtic penchant for infusing nature with mystical attributes, enhancing the narrative's magical ambiance.

We also underlined that the significance of names further deepens the connection to nature in the *Lay le Freine*. The names of the main characters, Le Freine (‘ash tree’) and Le Codre (derived from ‘hazelnut tree’, as we considered before), align with Celtic naming traditions that often carry symbolic meanings linked to nature or the character's inherent traits. This linguistic choice reinforces the narrative's ties to the natural world.

Supernatural intervention, a recurring theme in Celtic stories, is evident in the *Lay le Freine*. Le Freine's destiny appears guided by higher powers, emphasizing the influence of fate and divine forces. This mystical layer adds complexity to the narrative, resonating

with the Celtic tradition's exploration of otherworldly elements impacting mortal lives. In both the *Lay le Freine* and *the Lai le Fresne*, the supernatural elements are not overt; they are subtly woven into the narrative. This subtlety is evident in various aspects, such as the symbolic names of the twin sisters—Le Freine, signifying tenacity, and Le Codre, symbolizing wisdom—reflecting Celtic connections with nature. The supernatural is further manifested in the ash tree, cradling Le Freine as an abandoned infant, the love-tokening ring bestowed upon her, and the embroidered cloth she has cherished since birth, a key to her identity recognized by her mother later in life.

Enchanted objects, specifically the ring bestowed upon Le Freine as a love-tokening, contribute to the narrative's mystical dimension. This motif, prevalent in Celtic folklore, highlights the role of magical artefacts in shaping the characters' destinies. The enchanted ring becomes a symbol of significance, intertwining love and magic within the fabric of the *Lay le Freine*. The concept of a ring as both a pledge and a magical item associated with emotional memories extends beyond Celtic texts. An example of this is found in *Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild*, a Middle English romance discovered in the MS Auchinleck, recounting the tale of an English hero. In essence, the *Lay le Freine* intricately weaves together these Celtic-inspired elements, creating a narrative tapestry that reflects the enchanting and magical qualities characteristic of the Celtic storytelling tradition.

### 3.5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the comparative analysis between the Middle English Breton lay *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne* reveals a complex interplay of themes, characters, and motifs. The examination of their similarities and differences sheds light on the adaptation process and the deliberate choices made by the translator. Despite the challenges posed by the elusive authorship of the *Lay le Freine* and the partial damage to its physical form, a meticulous exploration of its plot intricacies, literary motifs, and character dynamics has provided valuable insights.

The comparative scrutiny of the *Lay le Freine* and of the *Lai le Fresne* emphasizes the persistence of Celtic elements in both narratives. The foundling theme, magical elements, naming significance, supernatural intervention, cultural dynamics, and enchanted objects collectively contribute to the Celtic resonance within the narratives.

This continuity underscores the enduring influence of Celtic traditions, even in the context of adaptations and translations.

Furthermore, the examination of stylistic choices, such as the variability in versification within the *Lay le Freine*, highlights the translator's nuanced approach to adapting the Breton lay tradition into Middle English. The deliberate modifications in plot details and the introduction of new elements underscore the translator's interpretation of the Middle English Breton lay as a literary form, adapting it to align with cultural and stylistic preferences of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century audience.

Essentially, this points to a vibrant exchange of ideas and themes between Middle English and medieval French literature, with both drawing inspiration from and being influenced by Celtic traditions. The adaptations and translations act like bridges that connect these distinct literary landscapes. They reveal how ideas flowed across different regions, emphasizing the dynamic and interconnected character of medieval literature during this period. This literary exchange showcases a fluid and rich interplay of cultural influences and storytelling traditions, contributing to the diverse tapestry of medieval literary expressions in Middle English and medieval French contexts.

The characters in the *Lay le Freine*, including Sir Guroun, Le Freine, Le Codre, the abbess, and others, contribute to a rich tapestry that reflects the nuances of love, fate, and identity. Each character's role and trajectory within the narrative add layers of complexity, inviting readers to explore the intricacies of human relationships and societal norms in medieval times.

The analysis of literary motifs, such as twin births, tokens of recognition, and the transformative journey of characters, further enriches the narrative tapestry. These motifs not only contribute to the thematic depth of the lay but also align with broader medieval ideals, emphasizing virtues, endurance, and the transformative power of individual fortitude.

In essence, the comparative study of the *Lay le Freine* and the *Lai le Fresne* enhances our understanding of the adaptation process, the cultural continuity of Celtic influences, and the dynamic nature of medieval storytelling. The Middle English Breton lay emerges as a distinctive work that, while rooted in the Breton lay tradition, exhibits its own unique characteristics and adaptations.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this thesis embarked on a journey of comparative analysis, exploring the intricate connections between Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne* and the anonymous Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*. The primary objective was to interpret the nature of the relationship between the anonymous Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*, and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*. Additionally, a secondary exploration was conducted to ascertain the potential presence of Celtic elements within these literary works.

In our comparative study between the *Lay le Freine* and Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*, character analysis provided insights into personas, seeking to identify and examine potential Celtic elements within the lay while enhancing our understanding of its cultural and literary context. This investigation aimed to unravel whether the anonymous English composer, possibly influenced by Marie de France or independent of her, had knowledge of the Celtic world. Additionally, we explored the perception of Breton lays, assessing whether it was stereotypical or grounded in factual knowledge.

Throughout this exploration, our interdisciplinary approach, rooted in Germanic and Romance philology, underscored the interconnectedness of English, French, and Celtic cultures.

This research commenced with the primary goal of conducting an analysis to discern and illustrate any Celtic elements present in the anonymous Middle English Breton lay, *Lay le Freine*. The focus was on unravelling linguistic, historical, and cultural facets within the narrative, aiming to contribute new insights to existing scholarship. As the study progressed, it became apparent that our initial hypothesis was indeed validated; the *Lay le Freine* bore a discernible infusion of the Celtic world.

However, what surfaced from the investigation were not entirely novel elements hitherto unidentified by previous scholars. Instead, the existing Celtic elements, well-documented in prior research, were revisited and meticulously examined. The interpretation of these elements was enriched by the assimilation of newly acquired knowledge, extending beyond the *Lay le Freine* itself. The expanded scope included a broader understanding of Middle English Breton lays, insights into Marie de France and



her *Lais*, the preservation and linguistic relationships among the Middle English Breton lays, and a comprehensive overview of the Celtic literary, linguistic, and cultural tradition.

In essence, while the investigation confirmed the presence of Celtic elements in the *Lay le Freine*, it evolved into a more extensive exploration. The study delved deeper into the comparison between the source text, the *Lai le Fresne*, and its horizontal translation (following Folena's typology), the *Lay le Freine*. This broader focus naturally evolved as compelling aspects came to light during the course of the research journey. The examination not only addressed the original query regarding Celtic elements but also offered a detailed perspective on the interaction between the two literary works.

In conclusion, this research contributes not only to the understanding of Celtic influences in the *Lay le Freine* but also broadens the scholarly discourse by highlighting the intricate connections between source texts and their translations. The exploration, while initially centred on one lay, blossomed into a more complete investigation, shedding light on the dynamic interplay of linguistic, historical, and cultural elements within the broader context of medieval literature.

Several intriguing possibilities emerge from the observations made in this study. Metrically, the *Lay le Freine's* versification exhibits a penchant for unconventional structures, challenging the traditional breakdown into feet, lines, and stanzas. Donovan's classification of up to four distinct types of couplets within its structure adds a layer of variability beyond the typical end-stopped couplet associated with octosyllabic verse. This complexity contributes to the poem's unique rhythmic and metrical composition. Further investigation into the additional couplet varieties, particularly the second type, where the initial verse can possess grammatical independence while the second is contextually linked, may provide additional insights into the lay's structure and, consequently, enhance our understanding of the poet's intentional decisions in creating an intricate balance between sentence structure and context. This deeper understanding can help reveal the subtleties of meaning, thematic complexities, and the overall artistic effect of the *Lay le Freine*.

Narratively, a comparison of the prologues in the *Lai le Fresne* and the *Lay le Freine* reveals interesting disparities. Despite the former being shorter, the latter's prologue includes additional elements that provide guidance on the impending story. This suggests that the Middle English audience might not have been familiar with the thematic implications, unlike Marie de France's audience. It implies that the Middle English author learned about this narrative style from Marie de France's poems, underlining potential

idealized perceptions of the Celtic world shaped more by literary narratives than direct engagement.

Exploring the author's perspective, variations in the *Lai le Fresne* and the *Lay le Freine* allow us to interpret the data better. The shift of a character's residence from Brittany to England and differences in expressing the theme of love may be influenced by the author's literary constructs rather than first-hand experience with Celtic culture. Investigating the religious sphere and the role of women further deepens our understanding of the author's literary constructs and thematic choices. This exploration provides insights into how the author approached and shaped religious elements and portrayed the roles of women within the narratives. By delving into these aspects, we can better grasp the author's perspective, motivations, and the cultural influences that might have shaped the portrayal of characters and themes in the texts.

Culturally and linguistically, the choice not to translate the twin sisters' names and the brief explanation of their meanings warrants additional research to determine the emphasis on the French source text over the Celtic substrate. The narrative also provides valuable insights into societal expectations around family, lineage, and social status, reflecting life in that historical period.

The *Lay le Freine* embeds Celtic elements not only in names but also in material objects, such as the love-tokening ring and the embroidered cloth. Supernatural elements subtly woven into the narrative align with Celtic tradition's exploration of otherworldly influences on mortal lives. Investigating why some narratives exhibit subtle supernatural elements compared to other Middle English Breton lays could offer valuable perspectives.

It is crucial to note that, for the scope of this thesis, the reconstructed portion of the *Lay le Freine* has been incorporated. The incorporation of this reconstructed section stems from the fact that, although the *Lay le Freine* concludes at line 340, leaving us without the authentic resolution of the poem, given the close affinity between this Middle English Breton lay and its source, the *Lai le Fresne*, it is plausible to surmise that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reconstructed version accurately reflects how the *Lay le Freine* might have concluded, had its original ending survived to the present day.

In summary, this thesis provides a detailed exploration that adds to the broader understanding of these complex relationships. Through an examination of linguistic, literary, and cultural aspects, we have uncovered the intricate connections woven by Marie de France and the anonymous Middle English author of the *Lay le Freine*. Our goal

was not only to analyse the texts but also to highlight the historical, cultural, and linguistic influences that shaped these literary creations. As we conclude this investigation, the tapestry now stands as a reflection of the enduring presence of Celtic elements in medieval literature, spanning both time and geography.

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