Emerging from folk and performative traditions, Breton lais/lays move into the written record with Marie de France’s courtly twelfth-century Anglo-Norman collection. Individual lays – those lifted out of Marie’s anthology (but others as well) – circulated on both sides of the channel and throughout Europe, with just a few Middle English versions enduring across centuries and into the modern world. Although some questions persist about the extent to which the Breton lays form a distinct genre and about exactly which Middle English texts deserve the appellation, scholarly interest in them has increased substantially over the past forty years. And, whether we consider the Middle English Breton lays within the manuscript matrix or within our own contemporary editions, conceptual and material frameworks obviously shape our encounters and influence our interpretations. Although we can (and often do) minimize their embeddedness in manuscript, different meanings and valences emerge when we examine them in proximity to texts from the same manuscript (unlike romances, the Breton lays have not received nearly as much attention in codicological analyses or in interpretations affected by manuscript study). Of course, we can investigate surviving variants, situating versions of the same basic narrative side by side; as Murray Evans has noted: ‘there are at least two or perhaps three Sir Orfeos and two Sir Degarês. It is a convenient and frequent shorthand for literary critics of the poem to deal with the Auchinleck versions as the versions of Orfeo and Degaré.’ And we might be drawn to the Auchinleck because of what Evans calls ‘a preference for the more faery versions and so-called “better texts” in Auchinleck.’ But, he argues, ‘an examination of [...] each manuscript version of the works in its manuscript context encourages a more accurate view, not only of the poems, but also of the contexts in which they exist.’

Middle English Breton lay manuscript witnesses frequently survive only as fragments; consequently, remnants are typically woven together to create an altered cloth: the ostensibly seamless narratives found in our modern editions, the lays we take as subjects for our hermeneutic inquiry. The Auchinleck Manuscript (National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1, no. 155), compiled circa 1330-1340, provides rich contrasts with modern renditions of three lays, because our modern editions alter and sew Breton lay manuscript materiality into what we consider ‘complete’ texts. Le
Freine in the Auchinleck MS lacks an ending; a folio has been cut away, leaving only a stub (fig. 1).³ Initial letters from the left-hand column of text on fol. 262r remain; nothing of the second column of text survives. In 1810, Henry Weber fashioned an imaginative re-creation of an ending in Middle English, translating directly from Marie de France to supply Le Freine with lines 341-408, lines that have been nearly universally adopted within print and online editions. Sir Orfeo lacks its introduction. Some 36-40 lines are missing, likely lost to miniature hunters who took the entire page (fig. 2). Here, too, only a stub remains (fol. 299v-⁴), leading editors to fashion an introduction by substituting opening lines either from the Auchinleck Lay Le Freine or from the Orfeo variant, Sir Orfew, found in Bodleian MS, Ashmole 61. A beginning couplet, some interior lines, and an ending, are missing in Sir Degaré, so it is also remodeled by borrowing from other manuscript versions of the lay. The opening couplet on fol. 78rb is missing because the miniature that would have preceded Degaré has been cut away (fig. 3). This damage also results in the loss of lines 36-42 on fol. 78va.⁵ The passing of time, eye-skips of copyists, forgetfulness of memory in the course of transmission, erasures, smudges, marginal additions, crossed out lines and manuscript damage, all give rise to editions of Middle English Breton lays as reconfigured objects, objects sewn together by editors who borrow pieces of texts from variants and introduce emendations to create what we think of as a whole text for literary study.

Among the surviving Middle English Breton lays preserved beyond the Auchinleck, is Emaré, with a problematic interpretative element: an elaborate, bejeweled and embroidered cloth that becomes nearly a character in its own right within the text. And it offers an apt metaphor for any discussion of Middle English Breton lays. The cloth originates in the Middle East, embroidered by the Emir’s daughter for the Sultan’s son as a sign of love, a gift marking their betrothal. It is then seized as plunder in war and given as a gift from a vassal to his lord, the Christian Emperor, Emaré’s father. The Emperor, in turn, has it cut apart and re-pieced into a robe for his daughter. This marvelous robe accompanies Emaré on an extended journey to foreign lands, from maidennhood to wifedom to motherhood, through two exiles, and finally to the reunion scene that marks the end of the narrative. Whether considered within their medieval manuscript matrices or within contemporary editions, the lays in Middle English also survive by a circuitous route across languages, cultures, and time. They are taken, borrowed, and/or adapted from less politically-powerful Breton (Celtic) folk materials by a more powerful French-speaking elite Norman writer in England. In Marie de France’s collection, they are preserved by the victors who conquered both Celts

³ All manuscript details for Lay Le Freine, Sir Orfeo and Sir Degaré are available online at http://auchinleck.nls.uk/. The stub is found here: http://digital.nls.uk/learning-zone/view/auchinleck.cfm?sid=262r_a. I am deeply grateful to the National Library of Scotland for permission to reproduce images from the Auchinleck that accompany this article.
⁴ See http://digital.nls.uk/learning-zone/view/auchinleck.cfm?sid=299v_a
(whether geographically British or Armoric) and Anglo-Saxons. As Middle English gains status in late medieval England, the lays are translated, revised, preserved, and redistributed into various manuscript environments by another dominant vernacular group: readers of Middle English. So, in the same way Emaré’s cloak is first fashioned using images of European romance lovers by Middle Eastern non-Christian culture, Breton lays are fashioned from Celtic folk materials by Normans. The cloth in Emaré moves geographically from Middle East to Europe and from ‘cloth’ to ‘robe’ because of war; and Marie de France’s Lais move, post-conquest, into one complete text within an extensive Anglo-Norman manuscript now housed in the British Library (MS Harley 978). Consonant with the way the cloth is cut apart and reassembled into a new garment in Emaré, Middle English Breton lays are cut apart and reassembled in new manuscript environments. Of course, such translation, fragmentation and survival is not unique to the Breton lays; like other literature moving from Anglo-Norman and/or Celtic sources into Middle English, the Breton lays mark both multi-cultural and multi-lingual inheritance while simultaneously performing an emergent English literary tradition. But unlike Emaré’s cloak or Marie de France’s collection in the Harley MS, the Middle English Breton lays wind up sewn, not together in manuscript collections of Breton lays, but rather scattered in miscellanies full of other texts and genres.

With our modern generic boundaries and ways of reading, we often resist reading the medieval miscellany as what Stephen G. Nichols and Siegfried Wenzel (some time ago) termed ‘a whole book,’ even though reading the Middle English lays in the manuscript matrix allows us to consider them within a potential ‘horizon of expectation.’ The ‘whole book’ approach assumes that medieval reading and listening audiences most likely experienced and understood the Breton lays in relation to other texts in the same manuscript. Clearly there are limits to this manuscript-oriented strategy. If juxtaposed material provides the framework for understanding a text’s reception or meaning, then the oral tradition, individual lives of a given community, the embeddedness of the reading experience within a particular historical moment – perhaps a homily or another utterance heard the day before (or perhaps the week before) – could be resting, in the minds and memories of readers, next to what is read in the manuscript. Reading for proximity moves us out into history, out into oral traditions and performances of various kinds that we cannot recover easily or reliably; however, other texts within a particular manuscript often do survive and thus can become viable contexts for understanding.

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6 Stephen G. Nichols and Siegfried Wenzel (eds.), The Whole Book: Cultural Perspectives on the Medieval Miscellany, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 3: ‘The notion of the manuscript as a “whole book” argues against the assumption of miscellaneity in a codex that contains diverse texts, assuming instead that an “organizing principle” informs the order and context of the book and points to a writerly or readerly agenda.’

7 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 44.
The Auchinleck MS is perhaps the most famous Middle English miscellany containing Breton lays. Three reside here, surrounded by forty other works. Below is a list of the manuscript’s contents, with the lays in bold (Lacunae are not listed).

…The Legend of Pope Gregory
The King of Tars
The Life of Adam and Eve
Seynt Mergrete
Seynt Katerine
St. Patrick’s Purgatory
Þe Desputisoun Bitven þe Body and þe Soul
The Harrowing of Hell
The Clerk who would see the Virgin
Speculum Gy de Warewyke
Amis and Amiloun
The Life of St Mary Magdalene
The Nativity and Early Life of Mary
On the Seven Deadly Sins
The Paternoster
The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin

**Sir Degaré**
The Seven Sages of Rome
Floris and Blancheflour
The Sayings of the Four Philosophers
The Battle Abbey Roll
Guy of Warwick, couplets
Guy of Warwick, stanzas
Reinbroun
Sir Beues of Hamtoun
Of Arthour & of Merlin
Þe Wenche þat Loved þe King
A Peniworþ of Witt
How Our Lady’s Sauter was First Found

**Lay le Freine**
Roland and Vernagu
Otuel a Knight
Kyng Alisaunder
The Thrush and Nightingale
The Sayings of St. Bernard
Daud ðe King
Sir Tristrem

**Sir Orfeo**
The Four Foes of Mankind
The Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle
Horn Childe & Maiden Rimsild
Alphabetical Praise of Women
King Richard
Þe Simonie…
Scholars currently working in book history and manuscript studies most often investigate the Auchinleck manuscript using one of three approaches: 1) as a text that valorizes the English vernacular; 2) as a project that consequently participates in shaping an emerging English national identity; and/or, 3) as a work that reflects the morals desirable within a literate, well-to-do family, highly sensitive to class issues. Three accomplished scholars exemplify such concerns: Thorlac Turville-Petre, with his *England the Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity, 1290-1340*; Ralph Hanna’s *London Literature 1300-1380*; and most recently Linda Olson’s 2012 chapter, ‘Romancing the Book: Manuscripts for “Euerich Inglishce,”’ recently published in the collection, *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts*.\(^8\) Romances and the explicitly religious or moral selections found in the Auchinleck lend best support to these theses. *Le Freine, Orfeo and Degaré* are, as a result, typically (though not always) in these discussions subordinated to the long and many romances that populate the Auchinleck.

*If*, given all the missing folios in what remains of the Auchinleck, we still decide to consider it an arranged, artful text, and *if* a crusading and martial program of emergent nationalism is represented in the longer romances of the manuscript, then *Le Freine* and *Orfeo* might be said to provide examples of (or yearning for) more peaceful conflict resolution. In *Orfeo*, violence occurs when Heurodis tears her hair and face overwhelmed by the threat of her upcoming abduction, but it is a grieving, self-directed violence, not martial; and while *Orfeo does* gather his military forces to battle the Fairy King, they are of no use against the world of Fairy. The power of music and love, rather than physical combat, resolves the struggle over Heurodis. Similarly, violence in the *Lay Le Freine* consists of child abandonment not direct physical assault. The foundling – left with tokens that proclaim a noble birthright – survives, reaffirming trust in the kindness of strangers to redress the mother’s callous rejection. Assuming the Middle English ending followed Marie’s text, *Le Freine* offers art (the elegant cloth and ring) and generous humility as the means to resolve the matrimonial, moral and genealogical tensions that create discord in the narrative.\(^9\)

But even if we consider the Breton lays in the Auchinleck congruent with (and reinforcing) nascent nationalist, vernacular, or bourgeois themes found in the longer

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\(^9\) Elizabeth Archibald suggests *Le Freine’s* placement in the Auchinleck ‘between a miracle of the Virgin and a pious story from the Charlemagne cycle, is less random than we might have thought […] [because] it is poised between exemplum and romance, […] [and] raises questions about the everyday experience of women and their treatment by men […] [It] suggests that for women, marriage is in fact the ultimate adventure’, ‘*Lai le Freine*: The Female Foundling and the Problem of Romance Genre,’ in Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (eds.), *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, Essex, UK, Pearson, 2000, p. 39-55, p. 52.
romances (which, by the way, we perceive with hindsight and our own ideological shadings), these themes are in dialogue with the manuscript’s Anglo-Norman features, not the least being the fact that almost all of its extant narrative contents are translations from French and Norman precursors. The romances and lays also contain a nostalgia for genealogical and cultural connections back to earlier generations and yearnings for a self in relation to that heritage. The Auchinleck is dominated by lengthy Guy of Warwick romances featuring a fictional and mythic hero who dashes about his narrative, protecting and defending other characters’ familial or ancestral claims to territory and land. But for much of the narrative he is, himself, separated from the comforts of a home. The majority of his adventures occur beyond Britain, and when he returns to England after traveling widely through Europe (as far as Constantinople), he becomes a hermit, withdrawing from the wounds of the world into a life of prayer. Placing Le Freine, Degaré and Orfeo in orbit around the significant Guy of Warwick material in the Auchinleck, highlights the problem of rightful inheritance, the struggle for verifiable genealogical descent, and the loss and recovery of one’s sense of self, place, family, and home. Reading the Auchinleck lays and romances this way pulls or orients the manuscript toward Continental Europe while simultaneously transplanting, translating, or adapting French narratives into a Middle English linguistic framework and geography. All three Breton lays in the Auchinleck are structured around loss and recovery; they provide consolation.\footnote{Ibid.} Le Freine is the abandoned twin who elopes with her lover, Guroun. Having preserved a cloth and ring that link her to her family, she is finally restored and recognized as a full and rightful member of her aristocratic family. Orfeo loses his beloved Heurodis; Heurodis goes mad knowing she will suffer abduction; and for years the two survive in parallel states of living-death. They endure the rupture of loss only to be reunited finally through the magic of music and song, resonating with the cultural continuities of story and music across the channel that offered a kind of consolation to descendents of Norman invaders.\footnote{The text also posits a kingdom left to the rule of Orfeo's steward rather than to his own children, positing a succession based on loyalty and proper actions rather than on the direct blood line.} Degaré is born from a fairy-father’s sexual assault on his human mother. Abandoned in his infancy as a result of the rape, the foundling eventually journeys to find his mother and then his father, barely escaping incest and patricide, before being recognized as the offspring of his parents, consolidating his adult identity, and marrying into a new and different future. The text tells us the very name ‘Degaré’ means ‘Thing, that not neuer, whar it is / Or thing that is negh forlorn also’ (256-257).\footnote{See James Simpson, ‘Violence, Narrative and Proper Name: Sir Degaré, “The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney,” and the Folie Tristan d'Oxford,’ in Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (eds.), op. cit., p. 122-141.} His appellation, from the French ‘égaré’ (meaning ‘lost’ or ‘one who wanders,’) figuratively reflects the situation of Anglo-Norman descendents in Britain, both seeking and competing with their Norman heritage – either way, weaving it into Middle English language and literature. So, more than primarily a celebratory declaration of a new English nation (or proto-nation), the early fourteenth-century Auchinleck is a text that acknowledges loss and nostalgia as it simultaneously presents...
the need to develop a continuity, a resonance, between past and present, between Norman-French and English. Compiled about 1330-1335, the Auchinleck might be said to stitch a seam between the Norman invasion of 1066 and the last battles of the Hundred Years’ War in 1453 (or 1475, depending on how we establish the end date).

Aside from its overt literary indebtedness to French and Anglo-Norman materials, a number of other features in the Auchinleck suggest we have a manuscript best understood to rest on a fulcrum between Norman (or Anglo-Norman) and English foundations. Thanks to Professors David Burnley and Alison Wiggins, we can now search the digitized manuscript’s lexicon to discover it contains numerous references to ‘English/Inglische’ and ‘England/Inglond’ (at least 50 times) as well as references to local English landmarks, towns, and cities that appear generously sprinkled through the manuscript.13 But if word frequency might be used to bolster a sense that the manuscript is oriented toward the emerging state of England, references to other nationalities and linguistic groups are also common: the words ‘Frensche/Frense’ and ‘Fraunce/Franse’ occur at least 64 times; ‘normandi’ 16 times; and references to ‘breitouns’ and ‘bretaigne’ no less than 32 times.14 Lightly macaronic verses like The Sayings of the Four Philosophers found in the Auchinleck intertwine Anglo-Norman with English, actually rhyming the end words of poetic lines in French with end words in alternating lines written in English throughout the opening of the poem in an abababab, cdcdcdcd, aeae rhyme scheme:

L’en puet fere & defere,  
ceo fait-il trop souent;  
It nis nouer wel ne faire,  
Þerfore Engelond is shent.  
Nostre prince de Engletere,  
per le consail de sa gent,  
At Westminster after þe feire  
maden a gret parlement.

La chartre fet de cyre –  
teo l’enteink & bien le crey –  
It was holde to neih þe fire.  
And is molten al away.  
Ore ne say mes que dire,  
tout i va a tripolay,

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14 The multiple valences of the word ‘breton’ and ‘bretaigne’ are discussed by Emily K. Yoder in Chaucer and the “Breton” Lay, Chaucer Review, 12.1 Summer, 1977, 74-77. See also: David V. Harrington, ‘Redefining the Middle English Breton Lay,’ Medievalia et Humanistica, n.s., 16, 1989, 73-96. The MED notes Middle English ‘breton’ comes from Old French ‘Breton’ which can refer to either a Breton or a minstrel; and that ‘Briton’ may refer to a native of the British Isles, a Celt, or a Breton. Brittany most typically appears in Middle English as ‘lesser Bretaigne.’ Irregular spellings abound, adding to potentialities and potential confusions.
Most main characters in the Auchenleck lays and romances possess French names. Latin also embroiders several items. Thea Summerfield’s recent investigation into the multilingual features of the manuscript nuances the perhaps over-enthusiastic interpretative valorization of the English vernacular in the Auchenleck. Similarly, the Auchenleck Orfeo and Lay Le Freine call attention to their origins as Breton lays and thereby accomplish an acknowledgement of (and an indebtedness to) Marie de France’s French-language collection. Paul Strohm, quite some time ago made this point emphatically: ‘What writers subsequent to Marie are telling us when they call their narrative poems lais is not that they know or even claim to know anything about Breton originals, but that they wish for their audience to glimpse in their poems something of the precision, something of the restraint, or even simply something of the skill which can be found in Marie’s highly influential body of poems.’ As Christopher Baswell argues, the Auchenleck ‘holds onto Anglo-Norman as the palimpsest language that authenticates heroic antiquity and aristocratic hierarchy. Codicological features also challenge any assumption that the Auchenleck manuscript is the first extant book composed completely (or nearly completely) in Middle English, namely because of the extensive damage to the manuscript. Forty-three items survive, but at least seventeen items are missing (over a quarter of the present manuscript). Alison Wiggins identifies the following losses, known because each item was numbered during the production of the book: ‘The original position of these lost items is indicated by the surviving item numbers: five items have been lost from the start of the manuscript as the first item bears the number vi (6); five more from between items xxxvii (37) and xlii (43); four are lost between xlv (46) and li (51); and three from between lv (56) and lx (60).’ She adds, ‘These calculations are, however, only approximate as they rely upon the accuracy of the item numbering of the lost leaves

Hundred, chapitle, court & shire, 
Al hit gol a deuel wey.

_Des plu sages de la tere, 
ore escotev vn sarmoun_, 
Of iiii. wise men, þat þer were, 
Whi Engelond is brouht adoun…

(I. 1-20)

and do not take [into] account [...] the scribe’s sometimes erratic numbering. In fact, we have no idea how long, exactly, the manuscript might have been beyond the last surviving item, so the loss may be considerably greater. And what has been lost? If the Auchinleck resembles typical English miscellanies from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we have likely lost French and/or Latin items and elements that would further nuance our sense of the Auchinleck’s geo-political and linguistic concerns.

Visual characteristics found in the Auchinleck also reinforce the manuscript’s role as a fulcrum between French/Norman cultural practices and Middle English ones. The frequent presence of thorns and yoghs – some even appearing as embellished capitals – strongly signal toward English (fig. 4). But echoes of French/Anglo-Norman cultural material can be found, as well, in the physical layout of the Breton lays (and in the Auchinleck more broadly). A marked visual feature of the Auchinleck is the emphasized blank space separating the color-filled initial letter of every line from the rest of the line (a design which, though it derives from standard but not, by any means, ubiquitous paleographic practices, graphically echoes the oscillating themes of separation and attachment dominating the lays and the manuscript’s romances). (See figs. 1, 2, and 5.) Placing Marie de France’s Le Fresne from Harley 978 (circa 1261-1265) next to Lay Le Freine from the Auchinleck (1330-1335) clarifies some visual commonalities (fig. 5). Both manuscripts feature large Lombard capitals, extending several lines tall with flourishes that flow out into the margins and up and down alongside the text. See figure 6 to compare the enlarged capital ‘L’ from the Harley with the enlarged capital ‘L’ from Auchinleck’s Sayings of the Four Philosophers. Placing the Harley capital ‘L’ next to Degaré’s capitals ‘S’ and ‘B’ demonstrates that the Auchinleck capitals are less flourished and the manuscript not as elite as the Harley, but visual up-swing, downward tendrils, and the swirls internal to the letters are similar (fig. 7). Both the Harley and the Auchinleck also feature red and blue alternating paragraph marks. Of course, we cannot know that Harley 978 provides a direct model for the Auchinleck, but the Anglo-Norman Harley MS and many other French manuscripts have a visual program that is echoed by the Auchinleck. These visual features, coupled with literary indebtedness provide compelling evidence that the Auchinleck is best seen as a bridge between French/Anglo-Norman materials and an increasing demand for Middle English literature in fourteenth-century England.

19 Alison Wiggins, ed., [http://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/physical.html#damage](http://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/physical.html#damage) See the website for complete information on damage. In addition to the missing items, Wiggins notes the following lacunae: fol. 6ar/fol.6av thin stub; fol. 35ra stub; fol. 37rb or 37va stub; fol. 48rb stub; fol. 61va stub; fol. 72ra/rb/va stub; fol. 84rb stub; gathering missing (approximately 1400 lines of text); fol. 107ar/fol.107av thin stub; leaf missing at end of Reinbroun about fol. 175; fol. 256a thin stub; fol. 262a thin stub; fol. 299a thin stub; leaf missing at end of Horn Childe; King Richard, fragments followed by many missing leaves; and many leaves lost between 277vb and the London fragments of Kyng Alisaunder.

20 I am deeply grateful to the British Library for permission to reproduce images from MS Harley 978 that accompany this article.
If the manuscript matrix is not – in its contents, linguistic features, or visual program – a ‘neutral vehicle’ for the lays, neither are contemporary editions. Our analysis and criticism are often based on editions that typically remove the Middle English Breton lays from their manuscript matrices, creating echoes of echoes of echoes, even if this very phenomenon has also kept them circulating in our time. Unless we work with the newly-digitized manuscript editions, the visual program found in medieval manuscripts substantially slips away to be replaced by normalized formatting and uniform typefaces. And the potential resonances of meaning within any specific manuscript are also typically set aside. Only three editions bring Middle English Breton lays together in one volume rather than situating them within anthologies of medieval literature more generally: Thomas Rumble’s edition dating from 1965; the edition I published with my colleague, Eve Salisbury, in 1995 (currently undergoing revision for a 2nd edition); and most recently, Colette Stévanovitch and Anne Mathieu’s *Les Lais bretons moyen-anglais*, published in 2010. Each edition orders the lays differently and contains slight variations in content (fig. 8). Certainly the similarities far outweigh differences, since all attempt to isolate a collection of specific texts more or less identifiable as Breton lays, unlike the many more-general collections of medieval romance that treat the Breton lay as more or less indistinguishable from short romances. But nevertheless, each edition weaves the lays into another kind of ‘whole book’ for contemporary readers, something akin to the cutting, rearranging, and re-sewing the Emperor does with the marvelous cloth in *Emaré*.

Rumble offers no explanation of his text’s contents or ordering. He begins with Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal*, and the lays are not presented in manuscript groups, historical order or in relation to extant French sources. He omits *The Erle of Tolous*, but his anthology does include Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*. Whether purposeful or not, his collection is book-ended by texts whose authors are known for sure: Thomas Chestre and Chaucer. Laskaya and Salisbury’s edition (organized by the TEAMS series) presents material chronologically: works from the early 14th century first, followed by works found in 15th century manuscripts. Notably, it omits the *Franklin’s Tale*. Comparing the Laskaya-Salisbury edition to Rumble’s, it is clear that a more rationalized order occurs, but there are also questions raised by the Laskaya-Salisbury first edition. The TEAMS edition rearranges the Auchinleck manuscript order of the lays to accommodate the marketplace. *Orfeo* appears first, with *Le Freine* second and *Degaré* last. In the manuscript, the order is just the opposite: *Degaré, Le Freine, Orfeo*.

*Orfeo*, of all the Middle English Breton lays, has sparked the greatest numbers of articles and book chapters by far, and it is included more often than any other ME Breton lay in various anthologies. The valorization of *Orfeo* in the Laskaya-Salisbury

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21 S. Nichols and S. Wenzel, (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 3.
edition is worth stopping to consider, since it is, in some ways, the least representative 
lay. A focus on the younger generation, on children (or young adults) who then grow 
into adulthood is a more common topos for the Middle English Breton lays than the 
already-married couple who dominate Orfeo. And Sir Orfeo also posits a future 
kingship based not on a predetermined familial ‘right’ of blood (since Orfeo and 
Heurodis produce no heirs) but on demonstrated ability, since the loyal steward 
becomes king after Orfeo (perhaps appealing to readers now, fulfilling our own 
contemporary fantasies). The power of the classical myth, echoing on into the present 
after Renaissance humanism (and the prestige of that material in Western culture) 
might also explain Orfeo’s placement and attention in contemporary editions. Or is the 
valorization of Orfeo, not only in the TEAMS edition but in scholarship more 
generally, a product of patriarchal desires not quite as well fulfilled by Le Freine with 
its focus on female characters and premarital sex (albeit absorbed, finally, into a fully-
patriarchal scheme) nor as comforted by the sensational Degaré with its inclusion of 
rape, near-incest, and near-patricide? Is this valorization in our editions evidence of an 
English turn away from Le Freine which pales next to Marie de France’s elite poetic 
accomplishment? Does it suggest an Anglophile bias that elevates a text set near 
Winchester, one that notably lacks an extant French precursor? Or is it a contemporary 
sensibility that values the indeterminate and multicultural, best performed by Orfeo 
with its inexplicable melding of quest, grief, music, love, and governance, its blending 
Celtic, Breton, Classical, French, and Middle English literary and linguistic materials?

The Stévanovitch/Mathieu edition arranges the texts in order of their affinity to known, 
extant French originals and so dislodges Orfeo from an initial position. Here, Le Freine 
and Landeval lead. Such an arrangement emphasizes the genealogical relationship of 
English material to French precursors. However, this edition, like the previous two, 
disrupts the Auchinleck manuscript order, placing Le Freine first in the volume, then 
Orfeo and last, Degaré. The French edition also supplies page-to-page translations of 
the Middle English into modern French, a move that sings the lays back into the 
modernized mother tongue even if its purpose is to help French students with the 
difficulties of Middle English.

We know texts are produced by and produce culture. That said, the three current 
editions of collected Breton lays each reveal their own contemporary cultural, 
geopolitical and social contexts and also help produce not only our academic cultures 
but also what our cultures call ‘medieval’ and what is valued about ‘the medieval’ and 
the ‘Breton Lay.’ As scholars, then, whether we consider the manuscript matrices of 
the Middle English Breton lays, or read and respond to the lays using modern edited 
versions, we piece them into distinct narratives and contexts, creating another garment 
out of them that lies anew across time and readers.