Judging from the production of manuscripts in the northern areas, French vernacular literature burst on the scene in France, Flanders, and England in the mid-12th century. The *romans d’antiquité*, the *romans* (that is, works translated into Old French) drawn from the Latin of Virgil, Statius, and Quintus Curtius, and the *Roman de Troie* from Dares and Dictys, demonstrate both an acquaintance with and an interest in the major literary/historical matière of classical antiquity. But the bombshell that was Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae* in 1136, followed by Wace’s *Brut*, the expanded Old French version of 1155, introduced the “matière de Bretagne,” thus filling out the classification of Old French literature defined later by Jean Bodel as the matière de France, matière de Rome, and matière de Bretagne.¹

Whereas the matière de France might be seen as popular history drawn from legend or oral narratives, the romans d’antiquité were translated and rewritten narratives whose characters and stories were already well defined. The matière de Bretagne, of course, presents another problem. There are references to an early Welsh nobleman, Bledri ap Cadivor (c.1070–1140, also cited as Breri or Bleeheri) who recounted the Tristan story in the 1130s at Poitiers,² but there was no Arthurian literature or matière de Bretagne until Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia*, purportedly given to him as a vernacular text by Archdeacon Walter of Oxford, stirred the imaginations of French writers. With the expanded version of Wace this narrative enters the vernacular world with notable additions either invented by Wace or supposedly drawn from oral sources. Indeed within the next three decades, Chrétien’s monographic romances add entire narratives,

¹ In the *Chanson des Saisnes* at the end of the 12th century, Jean Bodel divided the roman into these three types.
allegedly concerning knights of the Arthurian world, but whose existence and stories we know mostly from Chrétien’s *romans*. Both Wace and Chrétien can make reference to oral storytellers, but we do not know from where they come. Do these authors refer to oral narratives because they existed, or do they make such references to lend authenticity to their *romans*? And if there were no oral narratives, do we imagine that Chrétien invented these tales, an authorial maneuver uncharacteristic of the medieval esthetic and of the writers of the period?

Chrétien’s contemporary, Marie de France, composed her *Lais* in the second half of the 12th century, 12 short narratives in octosyllabic couplets ranging in length from just over 100 to something just under 1200 lines. Marie’s constant reference to Breton storytellers in her brief prologues and epilogues makes it clear that she either thought her narratives were Breton in origin or that she wished to give the appearance that they were. We, of course, do not know that she really heard these tales sung or narrated by Breton storytellers or whether the Bretons had such a wonderful reputation as storytellers that this was a way to enhance these tales in the eyes of her readers.3

It is a commonplace in Marie de France studies and in those of Old French romance to say that this *matière* derives from Irish and Celtic origin. The idea is not so strange in that Marie de France herself claims in the vast majority of the *lais*, either in her brief introductions or in her conclusions, that she heard the story from Breton storytellers. It is not uncommon to find such references in early romance. In Marie’s case, because some settings are on the Continent (*Bretagne la Menor*) and some in Great Britain and because it is believed that she was a French native living in England, it has been contested how and where this literature really became popular among Frenchmen. Did they encounter it in England and Wales after the Conquest of William, or did continental Breton storytellers provide the impetus? The linguistic remains of the Celtic language are no real help in that it is said that the

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3 The question of language and transmission of such tales is still unresolved. If transmitted on the Continent, were they told by bilingual natives? If transmitted in England, why would such Breton (presumably Welsh) natives have learned Norman French so quickly? One might imagine some bilingualism among the English, but Norman settlers comprised a small percentage of the population.