Machaut’s musical repertoire has come to us mainly through its preservation in his collected-works manuscripts, rather than in anthology manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. That this repertoire is bound together with Machaut’s narrative and poetic works says much about his perception and presentation of himself as both poet and composer. It also suggests that his musical works were meant to be read – in addition to being heard – by the same newly emergent group of lay readers, who engaged in the recreational reading of romans, dits and lyric poetry. Indeed Machaut’s motets with their simultaneously performed multiple texts and possible overarching narrative proposed recently by Anne Robertson strongly invoke readers as part of Machaut’s targeted audience for these musical works. Even within the secular songs there are numerous pieces, such as the double- and triple-texted ballades (the multiple texts, again, sung simultaneously), which need to be read in order for their texts to be understood fully. Similarly, the group of five “puzzle pieces” in Machaut’s rondeaux require a reader rather than a listener in order for the puzzle to be solved. Although listeners could enjoy the play on phonemes and the musical rendering of these songs and poems in performance, without having read and ruminated on the poems earlier, their understanding of the nuances in language and the veiled messages would

1 I would like to thank Deborah McGrady, Lawrence Earp and Jared Hartt for perceptive and detailed comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

2 Complete-works manuscripts: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), fr. 1586, 1585, 1584, 22545–22546, 9221, and Ferrell, on loan to Cambridge, Corpus Christi, no shelfmark (formerly New York, Wildenstein).

3 Deborah McGrady, Controlling Readers: Guillaume de Machaut and His Late Medieval Audience (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2006), pp. 3–16.

4 Anne Walters Robertson, Guillaume de Machaut and Reims: Context and Meaning in His Musical Works (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 79–102.

5 Ballades 17 (triple), 29 (triple) and 34 (double).

6 Rondeaux 6, 14, 15, 16, and 17.
be severely diminished. Machaut’s rondeau, “Ma fin est mon commencement,” famous for its palindrome construction, takes this idea one step further. The textual content of the song itself instructs the singers on how to put the music together. Without reading the poem closely and studying visual clues such as the upside-down text (found in all of the manuscript copies), it would be impossible to sing the song.7

Beyond his use of these devices – the simultaneous declamation of text, the puzzles and hidden meaning – Machaut also uses several musical devices to play with texts and meaning, particularly in his rondeaux. Machaut’s musical materials have been the subject of close study for some time, but studies generally focus on either a single piece (song, motet or Mass), or on music of a single genre such as the virelais or the motets, or focus on similarities of procedure in voice-leading, large-scale formal structure, sonority, rhythmic declamation or cadential procedures across several genres in order to try to grasp some principles or essences of Machaut’s musical language.8 While these studies have contributed enormously to our understanding of Machaut’s music, here I will consider the significance of the differences in the musical and textual-musical elements

7 The song is not included in BnF fr. 1586, the earliest of Machaut’s complete-works manuscripts. The clearest copy is found in BnF fr. 22546 on fol. 153r, in which the initial M is included, appearing upside-down; the initial upside-down M appears also in BnF fr. 9221 on fol. 136r. In BnF fr. 1584 on fol. 480r the initial M is missing, while in BnF fr. 1585 not only is the initial M missing on fol. 309r, but the text and music is aligned very poorly.