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An Eye-Witness Account or Literary Historicism? John Page's *Siege of Rouen*

Tamar S. Drukker

With King Henry V in France was a certain John Page who, according to his own testimony, had witnessed the siege of Rouen (1418-9), its devastating effects on the citizens, the negotiations between the two camps, and finally Henry V's victorious entry into Rouen on 20 January 1419. There are no traces of the notes that Page wrote while in France, '[a]lle in raffé and not in ryme / By-cause of space he hadde no tyme' (ll. 1307-8), but a structured poem of 1314 lines in four-stress rhyming couplets survives complete in a single manuscript and, in part, incorporated into the fifteenth-century continuations of at least ten manuscripts of the Middle English prose *Brut* chronicle.¹ John Page's poem *The Siege of Rouen* initially appears in the *Brut* written as prose embedded within the text with only minor alterations.² However, in the middle of the description of the French citizens' attempt to receive an interview with the English king, the compilers of the *Brut* abandon the prose and copy the poem verbatim, giving up the attempt to disguise its original form. The shift is clearly apparent in the *mise-en-page* of many *Brut* manuscripts, for the scribes not only reproduce the original text faithfully, they also reproduce it in the layout commonly used for poetry, with short verse lines and demarcation of the rhymes.³ This change does not occur at a significant moment in the poem and seems to reflect the compilers' willingness to include the poem within the framework of the chronicle, not merely for its historical or informative value, but for something we may call its poetic quality as well.

The *Brut* has for its models the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, the historical books of the Bible, classical historiography, and monastic chronicles from which the compilers derive both their information and their manner of presentation. The earlier part of the *Brut* relies heavily on earlier chronicles and annals. For the later

chapters, however, and especially for the continuations composed originally in Middle English and not long after the events they record, other sources were used. Among them were songs and ballads composed close to the time of the events, most of which are now lost. Their existence can be detected in the few surviving citations we do have, but also in the shift of tone of the prose narrative itself which assumes 'a certain poetical style.'⁴ And yet, this use of poetic source material occurs within a tradition of prose historiography, which developed beside a tradition of Anglo-Norman and Middle English chronicles in verse. While Latin metrical verse had been the dominant medium for composing any work deemed important from classical times onwards, from the twelfth century and more persistently in the following centuries there is an awareness of the limitations of verse as a medium for writing history.⁵ Nonetheless, short poems appear in chapters 168, 188, and 213 of the *Brut*.⁶ These are anonymous compositions, possibly songs, for they are rich in pattern of rhyme and sound, and reported to have been said or sung by soldiers on both camps during the Anglo-Scottish wars.⁷ These verse lines form part of the historical narrative as records of contemporary 'voice'. Unlike the chronicle as a whole, they are products of their time, the 'primary sources' a historian uses when composing a coherent narrative. The chroniclers' use of songs reflects an attempt to get as close as possible to the reality described, as if these lines are a form of an oral eyewitness account. The same can be said of John Page's poem *The Siege of Rouen*, and it is perhaps as a report of an eyewitness that the poem is principally valued in the *Brut*. The poet bases the authoritative status he claims for his poem on his own presence at the scene, equating eyewitness report with veracity:

And I shalle telle you how hyt was.
And the better telle I may
Ffor with my lege there-at I lay
And there-to I toke a-vyse,
Lyke as my wyt wolde suffyce. (ll. 20-4)

Page can coerce the historical details to fit the literary form he has chosen to use and still claim it is a true and faithful account of the siege because he was there to see and experience the events. Valued already by ancient historians as valid, and considered by Isidore of Seville (d. 636) to be the ultimate guarantee of accuracy, eyewitness report was highly esteemed in legal cases

and in written accounts of all kinds.⁸ The first-person report by someone present at the time was not only considered true, but also authoritative, and yet Page's story is not, and cannot be, objective documentation. Not only the demands of the verse form, but historical and literary models also shape the way in which Page sees, understands, and describes the siege of Rouen. It is not a historical document, such as the soldiers' songs composed on both sides of the Scottish border and included in the *Brut*, but a conscious reworking of historical data into a literary form which, while establishing its truthfulness, also marks the distinction between lived experience and its written transformation.⁹

In the opening lines of the poem, Page equates the siege of Rouen with other famous sieges whose significance lies not solely in their role within world history but also in the many narratives written about them. Henry V's campaign to take Rouen, the capital of Normandy, is presented with patriotic exaggeration as the most important military and symbolic taking of a city '[s]yn Jerusalem and Troy was gette' (l. 16). The sieges of Jerusalem and of Troy serve as models to the poet writing about a siege rather than to the king or his generals who conduct it. These examples from history shed light on the way a siege may be presented in writing, not the way it is to be mounted and won. These two sieges, or rather the written reports of them, had come to represent two different approaches to history and to an understanding of the unfolding of events. Troy, it was traditionally believed, fell as a result of pride as well as by a capricious decision of the gods, and was understood throughout the Middle Ages to be a model for a Boethian interpretation of history as the work of Fortune. Cities, kings, and empires rise and fall with the passage of time, as a natural phenomenon. The fall of Jerusalem, on the other hand, was presented in Christian exegesis as a deliberate act of revenge by God and as an essential part in the divine scheme of history. Thus the siege of Jerusalem neatly represented the Augustinian understanding of history as the unfolding of an inspired enactment of God's will.¹⁰

For the English, who traced their origins to a Trojan hero who was forced to leave his home because of the war, the tragic destruction of Troy was a fortunate fall. The opening chapters of the *Brut* are not concerned with the fate of those who stayed in the city or who were killed while defending it; they follow the adventures of the Trojan descendant Brutus who, metaphorically, has taken the city with him only to rebuild it on the banks of the Thames as 'newe Troye' (Brie I, chapter 5, p. 12). Though the detailed history of this war is not included in the chronicle, the tale of Troy both in

history (or rather pseudo-history) and in epic serves as the starting point as well as the historical and literary context for the *Brut* as a national historical narrative. British history stems from Trojan history, while the tradition of written history in English depends on the accounts of that siege and its aftermath.

Indirectly, the siege of Jerusalem also forms part of English history in so far as it becomes integrated into Christian history, and in so far as the Holy Land is tightly linked with England. There were several sieges of Jerusalem, two of which ended with the destruction of the temple, the burning of the city, and the exile of its population. In both cases, the city suffered months of siege before finally surrendering to the enemy. A short summary of the first siege, set by the Babylonians headed by Nebuchadnezzar, ending in 586 BCE, is found in II Kings 25, and again in the second book of Chronicles 36. 11-21. The prophets also describe this siege and the destruction of Jerusalem as a warning before the actual event as well as afterwards in lamentations. The report in the book of Kings is short and almost laconic, presenting the siege as a punishment set by God on his people for their misconduct, and therefore their suffering is justly deserved. The siege lasts three years, resulting in severe famine which eventually brings down the city's defence:

and a famine prevailed in the city, and there was no bread for the people of the land. And a breach was made into the city: and all the men of war fled in the night. [. . .] came Nabuzardan commander of the army, a servant of the king of Babylon, into Jerusalem. And he burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and the houses of Jerusalem, and every house he burnt with fire.¹¹

The text here does not describe life in the besieged city during the long months preceding its fall. The prophets dwell more than the biblical chroniclers on the suffering and horror of siege and destruction, mostly in a futile attempt to bring their hearers to repent for their sins and thus relieve themselves from such calamities brought about by God's wrath.

The second siege of Jerusalem, which received elaborate attention from contemporary historians, as it has from chroniclers ever since, is the one set by the Romans culminating in the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. The most detailed report of the siege and its outcomes is found in *The Jewish War* by the contemporary Jewish chronicler Josephus Flavius (37-

95?), known in medieval Western Europe in a Latin translation by Hegessipus. Josephus had spent the greater part of the period of the Jewish struggle for independence from the Empire among Roman troops, and he was present at the scene of most of the battles he records in his book. While the first-century histories of Dares and Dictys were thought to be accurate eyewitness accounts of the Trojan War, and as such reliable authorities,¹² Josephus really was a contemporary, writing his chronicle during and between battles. The destruction of Jerusalem received in Christian thought and history a profound significance as part of the narrative of the life of Christ. There are many medieval narratives of this siege which make a conscious link between the events of the late 60s in Galilee and in Jerusalem, as told by Josephus and known from other accounts, and the historical narratives of the New Testament.¹³

By evoking the memory of Troy and Jerusalem in the opening lines of his poem, John Page presents Henry V's campaign as a symbolic moment in history, and his own verse as stemming from a tradition associated with the great eyewitness narratives that underlie western civilisation and chronicling. The theme of the poem and its central figure also place it within a tradition of the *chansons de geste* and the great romances of battle. It is an effective, and at times a moving poem, but its uncompromising admiration for Henry, as well as its literary imperfections explain its relative obscurity. And yet, its inclusion within the *Brut*, one of the most widely read and diffused vernacular works in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, ensured for it a reading audience, eager for a story of heroism and chivalry set in their lifetime but echoing great moments from a heroic epoch.

Siege was a common feature of medieval warfare, with a practical as well as symbolically loaded significance. To those writing on warfare, the siege offers an intensive experience of battle, confined to one place and focused on one goal: defending the city from within or breaking that defence from without. Narratives of sieges, both historical and fictional, devote attention to the practical art of mounting a siege, the technical apparatus used, and the strategic considerations on either side. Treatises on warfare circulating in the Middle Ages combined the theoretical knowledge derived from classical military manuals with the accounts of recent wars, notably of the Crusades. The late antique treatise *De re militari* by Flavius Renatus Vegetius (late fourth-fifth century CE) was widely read in the Middle Ages, both in Latin and in translations into the vernacular.¹⁴ Vegetius' description of the Roman army and its warfare was archaic already in the time of

composition, but continued to be read and consulted until at least the late fifteenth century. Among the central themes found in Vegetius, and in other manuals based on this model, are an interest in the commander of the siege, the arrangement of the army, and the weapons and tools used for combat.

John Page does not miss the opportunity to produce a versified report of war and battle, though his main concerns are with the character of the king leading the siege and the political and symbolic significance of his campaign. The story of the siege begins, like many others, with a message from the king to the city, calling on it to surrender peacefully. The offer is rejected, and Page moves on to describe the city, focusing on its wall, gates, and moat, all designed to protect the city and secure it from foreign invasion. The stronger the city, the greater is Henry V's achievement in overtaking it. The detailed description serves the poet's purpose of praising the king and of placing this battle at the same level with the siege of Troy, a noble and strong city, the centre of culture and prosperity, brought down by change of fortune and human pride.

The initial splendour of Rouen also emphasises the extreme suffering and ruin brought on it and its inhabitants during the months of the siege. The great trench around the city 'brode and depe, / And fewe [men] myght fro many hyt kepe' (ll. 105-6), which was meant to secure, becomes the setting for the most painful and humiliating of deaths. It is in this ditch that the hungry children, women, and old men of Rouen must remain, exposed to the winter cold, on top of severe famine. In an attempt to diminish the suffering within the city, the leaders of the besieged city send the weakest citizens outside the city walls, with the hope that they will live a better life elsewhere. However, the English soldiers do not allow them to cross their line and they remain between the besieging army and the starving city, now beyond the reach of these banished citizens of Rouen. Page remarks, with a keen imagining of the comforts they lack, that 'many one there dyde for colde / That warmythe of howesë sauyd [haue] wolde' (ll. 555-6). The ditch, not the walls, becomes the emblem of Rouen, in a painful reversal of a fundamental medieval image of the city as reproduced on countless coins and seals.

When Rouen is brought down and its citizens are desperate, they turn to diplomatic meetings with the hope of reaching an agreement and bringing an end to their suffering. The negotiations between the two camps are another opportunity for Page to elaborate the contrasts between the victorious camp and the miserable Frenchmen. The poet describes the 'tentys' (l. 952; Brie II 413) built by King Henry for the French and the English delegates.

The tents stand in a ditch, but despite the rain, they are dry, offering those inside them warmth and protection. The poet, as an eyewitness, well-informed and eager to expand on the glory of the English camp, lists the names and titles of all the army leaders, describing their banners and extravagant military outfits,

in cotys of dyversyte
As lordys berys in hyr degre.
Gayly with golde they were be-gon,
Ryght as the son for-sothe hyt schone.
(ll. 979-82; Brie II 414)

The scene of these clean and neat soldiers brightens up the cold January day, and stands in a pathetic contrast to the

pore pepylle there were put owte
That ne had vnnethe a clowte,
But the clothys in there backe
To kepē them from rayne and racke.
(ll. 985-8; Brie II 414)

An artistic, rather than a documentary, impulse underlies Page's description of the heralds in contrast with the wretchedness of the French populace. This image is so powerful and telling, that it can still be found in the description of the siege by modern historians.¹⁵ While the compilers of the *Brut* accepted John Page's poem as a historical narrative, it is only because they themselves were writing a history rich with literary parallels, images, and metaphors. While the *Brut* had ceased to be read as 'serious history' already in the late sixteenth century, some powerful images in the poem are still considered 'authentic' by historians today.

As a first-hand report by a member of Henry V's company, the poem shows surprisingly little interest in the machines of war or the weapons used by either camp.¹⁶ Though we know nothing about John Page, we can be almost certain that he was not a combatant. Most of the second half of the poem is comprised of direct speech, presenting diplomacy as the crucial aspect behind the hostility and its final resolution in the essentially static context of the siege. Page offers a description of the war of words exchanged between the French and the English, not a description of actual fighting,

ending around the negotiation table rather than in the battlefield. Henry's victory, therefore, does not depend on his military superiority, but emerges from some other kind of higher position, which is expressed in language. We see Henry engaged in two sorts of verbal communication: he prays to God and he negotiates with the French. Whereas in hearing mass Henry exhibits his piety, his treatment of his enemy and his interviews with them highlight the chivalric ethos guiding his actions as a military leader displaying charity. Page adds to his description of the allowances the king makes towards the French when trying to reach an agreement, that he acted upon 'a poynt of cheualrye' (l. 1145; Brie II 418). The French are defeated because they sin (a word used throughout in the poem) both against God and against the ethical code of chivalry. Their sinning adds a further justification for Henry V's claim to the city. He has the right to govern Rouen not only because of the historical connection linking the English throne with Normandy, but also because of his moral and religious stature that would grant him lordship over other Christian peoples.

The hero of *The Siege of Rouen* is King Henry V, and if the poem aspires to the status of a new national epic, Henry is its chivalric protagonist.¹⁷ The poet is clearly interested in praising the king as part of his overall plan in composing the poem; through the history of the siege emerges the image of the besieger. Though respectful of the citizens of Rouen and sensitive to their suffering, the tone of the poem reflects the poet's partisan stance, siding with Henry and the English cause throughout.¹⁸ The chroniclers of the *Brut*, John Page, and presumably their intended readers, all see in Henry one of the great leaders of their nation, and accept without question his claims for lordship over a great part of France and the necessity for the ensuing battles.¹⁹ The chroniclers report how all the king's men support him in his properly legalistic demand 'of his title þat he had to Normaundy, Gascoyne and Gyan, which was his enheritaunce of righte' (Brie II 552). John Page suggests that King Henry is the legitimate and rightful ruler of Rouen, who after the long siege enters the city not as a victorious conqueror but as one receiving what is his by right. Page has the French citizens welcome the king into the city in this spirit:

Alle the pepylle of that cytte,
They sayde, 'Welcome, oure lege so fre,

Welcome in-to youre ounē ryght,
As hyt ys the wyllē of God all-myght.'
(ll. 1275-8; Brie II 421-2)

They accept the English claim over Normandy, and can only blame the French lords and warmongers for resisting Henry and thus subjecting the city to the horrors of the siege.²⁰ Earlier in the poem, Page uses the encounter between the English king and representatives from the city to further praise Henry. Though the English king does not heed their requests, they still come away from their interview full of admiration and respect for his might.

They sayde, 'He ys, to oure a-vyse,
Of alle erthely prycys pryce,
Takyng rewardē of hys chere
And to hys coun-tenaunce so clere,
To hys person in propyrte,
To hys fetowrys and hys bevte,
And to hys depē dyscrecyon,
That he hathe in possessyon,
And to hys passyng pryncē-hode,
And to hys mykylle man-hode;
And he ys mar-cyfulle in myght
And askysse nothyng but hys ryght.
Thes vertuys ys a gretē thyngē
To be with-yn an erdely kyngē.
Howe shuldē he but wyn honowre?
Howe shulde he be but conquerowre?
Welle we wote with-owtyn wene:
God hym louys, and that ys sene.'
(ll. 929-46; Brie II 412-3)

Page need not glorify the king, when those of the enemy camp seem to do it for him. Their speech is made up of the repetitive structure 'to hys x' in a long list of the king's favourable attributes. These parallel statements, heightened by the strong alliterative pattern, add to the rhetorical effect of these lines, and reflect the poet's careful use of rhymes and sound patterns. To make this praise even more valuable, Page makes a conscious note of describing the Rouenners in the most positive terms. Rouen, before the siege, is a noble and

worthy city, like Troy or Jerusalem, with churches and great houses whose inhabitants, '[a ij] thowsande, or ellys thre, / Rychely a-raydē at the beste' (ll. 374-5). The king is honoured by the dignity, strength, and pomp of his enemy. And yet, not even the most loyal of subjects can ignore the suffering inflicted by the king, in besieging the city, on those trapped inside it.

Since Henry V could not take over Rouen by force, he was determined to starve its inhabitants into submission. Hunger, not military weakness or wrong strategy, brings down the city. Much of the character of the poem's narrative flows from this static situation with no combat but a wealth of emblematic gestures, appeals, and denials. As Page notes, in one of his occasional flights of imagery, 'hunger brekythe the stonē walle' (l. 602), as if echoing the juxtaposition of lack of bread with the city walls being forced open in the biblical description of the fall of Jerusalem in II Kings 25. 3-4 cited above.²¹ Much of the *Siege of Rouen* is devoted to describing the misery of famine, within the city and outside the city walls. Pathetic scenes of hunger occupy many narratives of siege, and Page's description of the famine is something of a set piece. The food shortage results in numerous deaths, too many to allow the living to bury the dead, and those still alive are forced to eat what is not considered fit for human consumption, and are then driven into acts of cruelty and desperate, inhuman behaviour.

Page begins by offering an informed report concerning the state of affairs within the city. The number of the dead is high, but still the supply of food is becoming scarce, as he recounts in an almost grimly zestful passage:

They etē doggys, they etē cattys,
 They etē mysse, horse, and rattys.
 An hors quarter, lene or fatte,
 A c s. hyt was atte;
 A horssē-hedde at halfe a pound,
 A dogge for þe same mony round.
 Ffor xxx d. went a ratte.
 Ffor ij noblys went a catte.
 For vj d. went a mous [. . .] (ll. 471-9)

When the people lack food they resort to eating whatever they can find, and the economy of famine sets a high price on each of those items. This is not the first time the *Brut* includes a description of famine, and in the previous occasion too the description includes the unappetising substitutes the hungry people must eat

together with the precise sum these things can fetch. Chapter 189, devoted to the months following the second siege of Berwick, concludes with this paragraph:

And þat same tyme bifelle meny meschyues in Engeland; for
þe pore peple deide in Engeland for hunger; and so miche and
so faste folc deaden, þat vnnepes men might ham bury; for a
quarter of whete was worþe xls., and ij 3ere and an halfe a
quarter of whete was worþe ij mar3; and ofte-tymes þe pore
peple stale childern and ete ham, and ete also alle þe houndes
þat þai might take, and ek Horse & cattes [. . .]

(Brie I 209-10)

Among the possible sources of meat, the *Brut* lists, in passing, children, which the poor hungry Englishmen steal and eat. Page does not describe any cases of cannibalism among the hungry citizens of Rouen, but he does mention mothers depriving their children of the little food they possess and other moving examples of what is perhaps one of his principal themes in the poem, the power of want when 'hunger passyth kynde and loue' (l. 521).

The horrific image of being driven by hunger to eat children can be found already in the Bible and afterwards in other narratives of siege. It is perhaps one of the most recurrent images of human beings in extremity. One of the most shocking of biblical passages concerns a siege on Samaria by the Syrian king Benadad. The narrative of the siege is short, and focuses on a single episode:

And there was a great famine in Samaria: and so long did the
siege continue, till the head of an ass was sold for fourscore
pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of pigeons' dung,
for five pieces of silver. And as the king of Israel was passing by
the wall, a certain woman cried out to him, saying: Save me, my
lord O king. And he said: If the Lord doth not save thee, how
can I save thee? out of the barn-floor, or out of the wine-press?
And the king said to her: What aileth thee? And she answered:
This woman said to me: Give thy son, that we may eat him to-
day, and we will eat my son to-morrow. So we boiled my son,
and ate him. And I said to her on the next day: Give thy son that
we may eat him. And she hath hid her son. When the king heard
this, he rent his garments, and passed by upon the wall.

(II Kings 6. 25-30)

Once again the narrator describes the famine in terms of the market price that determines the cost of victuals. But the interest shifts quickly from the prices of unacceptable meat to the exchange arranged between two hungry women in the city. The abominable tale of filicide and cannibalism is set within an economic discourse of agreed contract and fair exchange. The grieving woman does not wail her son's death, nor her hunger, but the breach of promise made to her by another mother.

Such a scene, of parents driven by hunger to killing and devouring their own children, appears earlier in the Bible as a warning and the ultimate consequences of sin. If the people of Israel were not to follow God's instructions, they would be made to suffer and act in precisely this way.²² In the passage quoted above, there is no condemnation of any of those present and responsible for the tragedy; neither the Syrian king, nor the helpless King of Israel is blamed for the extreme famine; nor is the mother guilty of killing and boiling her own son. The unnatural death of the child is shocking and grievous, but is not viewed as a crime. If there is a guilty party, it is the second mother who shares the meat of the slaughtered infant but would not sacrifice her own son in return. Can she really be the villain of this tale? Read in the light of the conditions set by God in his commandments, those participating in this drama are living through the punishment assigned to them by God for sins committed earlier. They must act in this way, driven by hunger and by providence, so that the murderous mother and the deceiving mother both fulfil their part in the realisation of God's threat.²³

This reading of the biblical narrative establishes a figure of much importance to Page, the image of the guiltless besieger, the instrument of God's justice. The enemy besieging Samaria—and the same is true of the Babylonians and the Romans who destroy Jerusalem—partake in God's plan as executors of divine justice. If an analogy were to be drawn between the pagan rulers attacking Israel and Henry V in Rouen, the English king, like Nebuchadnezzar and Titus, acts according to God's will. He must be there to inflict on Rouen the punishment it deserves for rejecting the English rule and for the one sin Page alludes to in referring to 'that proude cytte' (l. 59)—its pride. This cardinal sin is the source of the Rouenners' objection to Henry's demands for lordship over them. It is the months of siege and hunger that change the people's constitution so that they become 'so meke' (l. 678; Brie II 405), eventually humble enough to agree to the terms set by the English to end the siege.

But the poem does not so easily efface the question of guilt. When the French leaders of the city send out the starving children, women, the sick, and the old, they assume that the English king will not consider these helpless citizens a threat and will allow them to pass through his lines and seek their fortunes elsewhere. However, Henry understands the laws of war in a different way and prevents the wretched refugees from getting beyond the English camp. They remain, without food or shelter, outside the city wall, between the two warring armies, because '[t]he cytte wolde not lete them yn' (l. 553). Now it is the Rouenners' turn to make a savage judgement to protect their interests. Those left outside the city walls beg the English for some bread, but do not blame Henry's men for the misery they are in but rather 'cursyd hyr ownē nacȳon' (l. 552). Henry will not take responsibility for their condition, addressing the city delegates who wish to arouse the king's pity on their behalf: 'hoo put them there, / To the dyche of that cytte?' (ll. 838-9; Brie II 410). The interview between the Rouenners and King Henry is legalistic, concerning loyalties, duties, and one's judicial responsibility for one's actions, as befits a king whose claim to the French throne is essentially a matter of law, not vaingloriousness or pugnacity. Henry insists on his right to the city and blames the French for bringing their suffering upon themselves.

The severe conditions caused by the siege do not only lead to the eventual surrender of Rouen; they also allow King Henry to bestow his kindness and exhibit his mercy, acting beyond the line of strict justice. The portrait of the king which emerges from the poem is of a just, responsible, and above all a pious monarch, who displays the medieval commander's customary acceptance that non-combatants must suffer because they are part of a conflict. His piety is stressed in repeated mentions of his hearing mass (notably when the French delegates come to see him, ll. 793-6; Brie II 409), and by feeding the hungry on Christmas Day, granting his soldiers permission to share their food with the starving Rouenners. Henry's behaviour seems to indicate that there are different modes of pity and charity. It would have been a sign of weakness were he to show kindness to those starving people turned out of the city, for he would be driven to do so by the circumstances created by his French opponents. However, using the Feast Day to extend his Christian charity to those who are suffering, Henry's action derives from his obligations to God, not to the French.²⁴ Christmas is traditionally a time of charity and an opportunity for Henry to act as a generous Christian:

That seson of Crystysmasse,
I shalle you telle a fayrë grace,
And a mekenys of ourë kyng,
Of goodenys a grete tokenynge.
He sent a-pon Crystysmasse daye
Hys herrowdys of armys in ryche a-raye,
And sayde, by-cause of that hyghë feste,
Bothe to mostë and [to] leste,
With-yn the cytte and with-owte
That werë stores and vytaylys with-owte.
They shulde have mete and drynke inowe
And saue condyte to come there-too. (ll. 557-68)

The king offers food to all those in and outside the city wall, underwritten by the 'saue condyte' that it is his right, as king, to grant. By accomplishing this act of grace (an adjective often used by Page when describing King Henry, here with a strong theological nuance) to all French citizens, the English king indirectly criticises the French for their treatment of their own people. He does not discriminate between the rich and the poor, the useful and the needy, thus pointing to the internal tension between the strong and the weak within the French city. It is their maltreatment by the French that leads the starving crowds to turn against their own leaders, to accuse them of resisting the English rule only because of their 'pompë and [...] gretë pryde,' (l. 1078; Brie II 416).²⁵ Pride leads the wealthy French to subject their own people to starvation instead of saving them and their city by accepting Henry's conditions for surrender.

On January 19, 1419, the citizens of Rouen surrendered and King Henry V received the keys of the city. The following day he entered the gates in a ceremonial procession. His walk through the city, accompanied by his army generals as well as bishops and men of religion and in the sight of the people of the town made an impression on his new subjects and on the poet. Page describes it in detail, sketching the king's route from the city gate to the Cathedral where he heard mass, the splendour of Henry's dress, and the reaction of those present.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw many kings and queens publicly entering a city, encouraging what quickly became a highly-stylised display presented by the citizens of these cities in honour of the ruling

monarch. The *Brut* describes some of these processions, for they were historical events of significance in the lives of the rulers as well as carrying immediate consequences for the cities and their people. By the fifteenth century, the occasion of a monarch's visit to a city, whether after a war, before a coronation, for a wedding, or any other event, was celebrated by an elaborate staging of 'many dyvers showes and sightis' (Brie II 426) as in the reception of Henry V and his French wife Katherine in London in 1420. Unlike the examples from London where the city receives its own monarch, the citizens of Rouen have until the end of the siege been loyal to the king of France and considered Henry as an enemy and an intruder. By describing the Rouenners' reception of the king in terms that echo those of the English royal entries, Page may be suggesting that the French citizens do not simply accept Henry because he has defeated them in battle, but also accept his historic claim to overlordship; they now willingly consider themselves his subjects. Henry, too, is conscious of his acquired title and his responsibility for his new subjects who are still in dire need of food and protection. The poem ends with two entries into the city: the first is that of the Duke of Exeter in preparation for the king's entry the following day. On both occasions, the people of Rouen welcome the English official with cheers, but while Exeter stages a pompous entry, '[t]roppettys blewe there bemys of bras, / Pypys and claryons bothe there was' (ll. 1213-14; Brie II 420), King Henry is more decorous and solemn in his conduct. Page points out this difference, remarking,

[Henry] passyde yn with-owte any pryde,
With-owtyn pype or claryons blaste
Prynce devoutely yn he paste,
As a conqueroure in hys ryght,
Thankyng euër God almyght. (ll. 1270-4; Brie II 421)

In the very manner by which Henry enters Rouen he again, according to Page's report, exhibits the central characteristics that make this conquest justified and right. He is a responsible ruler and a pious Christian, who duly recognises the need for humility, even in his hour of triumph. Unlike the Duke of Exeter, he will not overlook the fact that among those cheering his entry are people whom Page describes with a keen eye:

Mykelle of the folke that were there-yn,
They were but bonys and bare skyn,

With holowe yeen and vysage sharpe,
Vnnethē they myght brethe or carpe,
With wan color as the lede
Not lyke to lyue but vnto dede.

(ll. 1227-32; Brie II 420)

These images of horror are used by Page in contrast to the splendour exhibited by the Duke of Exeter and his company, and the poet will not dwell long on this sight, as he concludes, '[o]ff them y wylle no morē spelle' (l. 1243; Brie II 421). The king, however, unlike the Duke of Exeter and almost against Page's wish to overlook the painful scenes still visible in Rouen after its surrender, first thanks God, and then turns to tend to the city, '[i]ncresyd of mete, drynke of the beste. / Thorough the grace of God! oure lege' (ll. 1302-3; Brie II 422). Feeding the hungry is only one of the ways by which King Henry 'sette [the town] yn rewle and gouernawnce' (Brie II 391).²⁶ By bringing peace, prosperity, and good governance, Henry justifies the siege and adds his own humility and piety to the reasons for his right over Normandy.

The ceremony in Rouen, unlike similar occasions in England, begins with the symbolic presentation of the keys of the city to the king. The *Brut* lists other battles, sieges, and victories of Henry V in France, which end with him receiving the keys of Calais (Brie II 300-1), Harfleur (Brie II 377), and Caen (Brie II 384), to name just a few precedents. The capture of Rouen, though the capital of Normandy and an important city on the Seine, is not the most important battle Henry V fights, but it acquires prominence in the *Brut* because of the chance existence of a poetic report of the scene to which the compilers had access. Those manuscripts that contain a part of Page's poem highlight the story of Rouen simply by this inclusion, eventually drawing attention to the shift in medium of narration, the use of verse, and the first-person narrative and direct speech. Other versions of the chronicle also single out this event by describing it in more detail than the other French battles and using it to focus on a portrayal of King Henry. There are different reasons for this. The victory in Rouen is won without a battle, and with minimal casualties on the English side. The story of Rouen also fits best the image of the king which the chronicle promotes and can most readily be associated with the great sieges of history. The compilers of the *Brut* share Page's admiration for Henry. Accumulated details in the unfolding of the events concerning the siege of Rouen help to promote the image of the king as

warrior whose engagement in conflict only highlights his piety and charity that are the true sources of his right to rule. The possibly accidental time of the fall of the city, near Christmas, adds to the symbolic overtones that those writing about the siege do not ignore: the timing allows Henry to act mercifully on Christmas Day and to enter victoriously into the city very soon thereafter.

Rouen is more like Troy and Jerusalem than any of the other French cities conquered by an English monarch, because of its splendour, its long endurance, and hence the great suffering of its citizens. Without cancelling the historicity of the siege—and Page's detailed and informed account establishes the historicity of the event—Henry V's taking of Rouen also becomes a symbol and an archetypal case of siege warfare. The tale of justified war and ultimate suffering is used by the poet and the compilers of the *Brut* to exhibit the forces and considerations underlying all tales of siege. The citizens trapped inside the city are punished for their aspirations and success, their defiance of God, and their selfishness. The city, often presented as an enclosed fortress, is the seat of pride and conceit, almost a second tower of Babel, which is punished, and in the case of Rouen given the opportunity to revive once the citizens not only surrender but accept the governance of their new king. Unlike the classical and biblical precedents, the siege of Rouen does not end with destruction, but with Henry's entry and his establishment of order in the city. Since according to the English chroniclers Rouen should have been under English rule all along, the citizens of the city are not considered as enemies, but as rebellious subjects, who, once they accept Henry V as their lord, need not be exiled from their home, and Rouen itself can remain intact and be fortified. Symbolically, by bringing 'rewle and gouernawnce' to Rouen, Henry equates himself with the great figures of British history, such as Brutus and Arthur, the founding figures who build, or rebuild, cities, and establish in them a stable polity.

The compilers of the *Brut* allow for the inclusion of a distinctively different literary genre in the chronicle in their section devoted to Henry V because John Page's poem assists them in presenting the king as an outstanding figure in English history. While Page presents his poem as a contemporary eyewitness report, the transition from experience to highly-crafted written verse has made his poem into a literary work rather than a historical document. Its descriptions are guided by an aesthetic preference for opposites, and the unfolding of the events follows a literary tradition with classical, biblical and symbolic allusions. Much of the poem is devoted to speeches that are clearly in Page's voice and not exact rendering of the oral

exchanges between the English and the French. Unlike the soldiers' song cited in the *Brut*, 'The Siege of Rouen' is not a primary source, but a work of written historiography, with its own agenda and bias, just like the *Brut* chronicle in which it appears. The inclusion of verse in the prose chronicle exemplifies the compilers' willingness to incorporate into the *Brut* varying sources and written accounts, in an attempt to make this work into a complete and all-encompassing narrative of early British and contemporary English history. The compilers of the *Brut* recognise the artistry behind John Page's poem but do not dismiss it as a-historical. Their compilation, too, is an attempt to compose the history of England which is itself based on literary models and conventions, and guided by political and aesthetic inclinations.

NOTES

¹ Quotations from the complete *Siege of Rouen* surviving in a single fifteenth-century manuscript, British Library, Egerton MS 1995, fols 87r-109v with corrections from four other manuscripts are from *John Page's Siege of Rouen*, ed. by Herbert Huscher (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1927). An earlier edition by James Gairdner was published for the Camden Society under the title *The Historical Collections of A Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century*, Camden Society n.s. 17 (Westminster: Nichols, 1876), pp. 1-46. The poem is number 979 in Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), and number 297 for the fragment as it appears in the *Brut*; see also Robbins and John L. Cutler, *Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 114. It is described under section 6, 'Historical Ballads and Poems in Chronicles' of *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, general editor A. E. Hartung (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1989) vol. 5, pp. 1427-8. F. W. D. Brie prints the poem from British Library, Cotton MS Galba E. VIII collated with BL, Harley MSS 266 and 2256 under section D—'Continuation of the *Brut* from A.D. 1418 to 1430, including John Page's Poem of the siege of Rouen'—in the second volume of *The Brut or The Chronicles of England*, EETS o. s. 131, 136 (London: Kegan Paul, 1906, 1908), pp. 405-422. When quoting sections of the poem which are included in Brie's edition, page references to this edition follow the line reference to the poem as edited by Huscher. On other *Brut* manuscripts containing the poem see Lister Matheson, *The Prose Brut: The Development of a Middle English Chronicle* (Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), pp. 133-56 and A. S. G. Edwards, 'The Siege of Rouen: A Bibliographical Note', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 43 (1996), 403-4, as a correction to the list of manuscripts in the *Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, V 1665.

² See p. xv of Gairdner's introduction, and Frederic Madden's introduction to his edition of the poem taken from *Brut* manuscripts and published as 'Old English Poem on the Siege of Rouen, A. D. 1418', *Archaeologia*, 22 (1829), 350-84. An incomplete version of the poem, from Oxford, Bodleian Library MS E. Mus. 124, was published by J. J. Conybeare as 'Poem, entitled the "Siege of Rouen": written in the Reign of Henry the Fifth', *Archaeologia*, 21 (1827), 43-78.

³ Usually, the poem is written out as verse. There are some manuscripts where the poem appears in long prose lines with punctuation used to mark the division between verse lines. Those are Holkham Hall MS 670; BL, Harley MSS 266, 753; Lambeth Palace Library MS 331; and University of Illinois MS 116. See Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards, 'Middle English Verse in Chronicles', in *New Perspectives on Middle English*

Texts: A Festschrift for R. A. Waldron (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2000), pp. 119-28, with a discussion of Page's poem in the *Brut* on p. 122.

⁴ Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), p. 116. On the *Brut*'s reliance on oral traditions, songs, and ballads see also V. J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Blandford, 1971), p. 29; and R. M. Wilson, *Lost Literature of Medieval England* (London: Methuen, 1952), p. 198.

⁵ Gabrielle M. Spiegel writes in *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) that by the thirteenth century 'Old French prose had become a privileged instrument for the communication of morally and socially valuable knowledge [. . .]' (p. 56). The *Brut*, originally in Anglo-Norman, depends on these categorical assumptions regarding written compositions from the thirteenth century onwards. On the same theme see Peter Damian-Grint, *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Inventing Vernacular Authority* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), chapter 6. For a general description of the Middle English prose *Brut* see Robert Albano, *Middle English Historiography* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 37-40; Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1982), II 73-6, 220-6; Edward Donald Kennedy, 'Chronicles and Other Historical Writings', volume 8 of *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500* (New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1989), pp. 2629-37, 2818-33; Lister Matheson, 'Historical Prose' in *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*, ed. by A. S. G. Edwards (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984), pp. 209-14; and John Taylor, *English Historical Literature in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), pp. 110-32.

⁶ Another example which might help to establish the status of rhyme within prose historiography comes from the second Middle English translation of the Anglo-Norman *Brut* ascribed to John Mandeville. This translation, surviving in two manuscripts, includes a short poem on the battle of Halidon Hill (1333), rendered in prose in all other surviving prose *Brut* versions. The poem appears as Appendix A in the first volume of Brie's modern edition of the *Brut*, pp. 287-9, *IMEV* 3539. Continuations of the *Brut* into the late fifteenth century include also an English mocking song against the Flemings, *IMEV* 2657 and 4034. See Brie's edition, II 582-4, 600-1. For a critical discussion of this poem and its historical and political significance see James A. Doig, 'Propaganda, Public Opinion and the Siege of Calais in 1436', in *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Rowena E. Archer (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), pp. 79-106, esp. pp. 98-9, and Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*, p. 23.

⁷ Items 841, 2039.3, and 1934 in *The Index of Middle English Verse*. See Boffey and Edwards, 'Middle English Verse in Chronicles', p. 123.

⁸ See Jeanette Mary Ayres Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth in the Middle Ages* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), p. 23; Frank Brandsma, 'The Eyewitness Narrator in Vernacular Prose Chronicles and Prose Romances', in *Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 57-69; and Damian-Grint, *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance*, chapter 3.

⁹ The *Brut* relies on written authoritative accounts of the past. When those are lacking, as in the case of BL, Egerton MS 650, the responsible scribe ends the chronicle with the siege of Rouen, with the following comment: 'Here is no more of the sege of Rone and þat is because we wanted þe trewe copy þerof bot who so euer owys þis boke may wryte it oute in þe henderend of þis boke or in þe forþer end of it whene he gettes þe trewe copy when it is wrytten wryte in þeis iij voyde lyns where it may be foundyn.' (fol. 111r)

¹⁰ For the Augustinian view of history and Augustine's own definition of 'secular history' as opposed to 'sacred history' see R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 17 and *passim*. On these two philosophical approaches and their manifestation in the stories of these two sieges see Malcolm Hebron, *The Medieval Siege: Theme and Image in Middle English Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), chapters 4 and 5, especially pp. 92-7, 112-19.

¹¹ II Kings 25. 3-4, 8-9. Biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible translated from the Latin Vulgate*, 4 vols. (Douai: English College, 1609, reprinted 1750).

¹² C. David Benson, *The History of Troy in Middle English Literature* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1980), pp. 3-5, and Hebron, *The Medieval Siege*, pp. 95-6.

¹³ Such is the late fourteenth-century Middle English verse *Siege of Jerusalem* which combines the story of the siege with the legend of Veronica. See *The Siege of Jerusalem*, ed. by Ralph Hanna and David Lawton, EETS o.s. 320 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). The poem is closely related to the metrical romance 'Titus and Vespasian' of which the prose *Siege of Jerusalem* is an abridged re-rendering. See Auvo Kurvinen's introduction to his edition of *The Siege of Jerusalem in Prose* (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1969), pp. 19-20, 27-31.

¹⁴ A Middle English translation was made in 1408 for Lord Thomas Berkeley. A later fifteenth-century verse translation was edited by R. Dyboski and Z. M. Arend and published as *Knyghthode and Bataile: A XVth Century Verse Paraphrase of Flavius Vegetius Reatus's Treatise 'De Re Militari'*, EETS o.s. 201 (London: Oxford University Press, 1935). See the editors' introduction for a brief discussion of the manuscript and its source. For more on Vegetius in the Middle Ages, see Hebron, *The Medieval Siege*, pp. 11-15.

¹⁵ As in Desmond Seward's description of the famine and of Henry's entry into the city in *Henry V as Warlord* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987), pp. 117, 119; or

Kingsford's narrative of the siege in *Henry V: The Typical Mediaeval Hero* (London: Putman, 1901), chapter 15, especially p. 255.

¹⁶ Hebron, in his study of representations of medieval sieges in the romances, convincingly shows how the detailed knowledge of siegecraft and battle machines is often informed by literature rather than lived experience, with archaic modes of warfare often ascribed to late medieval sieges. See *The Medieval Siege*, especially chapters 2-3.

¹⁷ Henry, as presented in the poem, combines the qualities of piety and mercy with the practicality, seriousness, and responsibility required of a worldly leader. On Henry V in Page's poem see Lee Patterson, 'Making Identities in Fifteenth-Century England: Henry V and John Lydgate', in *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*, ed. by Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 69-107 (p. 86).

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that Page does not profess anti-French sentiments as such, a tone that distinguishes his work from the popular soldiers' songs. Of Page's pity and respect to the citizens of Rouen, see Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*, pp. 66-7, and Seward, *Henry V as Warlord*, p. 117

¹⁹ BL, Cotton MS Claudius A. VII contains only the section of the *Brut* devoted to Henry V, attesting to contemporary interest in this section in particular.

²⁰ See Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*, p. 65, on the attitude of the people of Rouen towards King Henry.

²¹ The axiom of hunger breaking down the city walls can also be found in Vegetius who, in a fifteenth-century Middle English translation, describes the danger of famine: 'Honger within, and enmytee abowte, / A warse foo withinn is then withoute' (*Knyghthode and Bataile*, p. 42, ll. 1130-1).

²² See Leviticus 26. 29 and Deuteronomy 28. 53-7.

²³ A similar story is related by Josephus Flavius concerning a certain woman, Mary, from Jerusalem, who overcome with hunger, kills and roasts her baby, eating half of it and concealing the rest. The smell of roasted meat, however, attracts to her house people who wish to share her food. She offers them the remains of her child, admitting her crime and urging them to share in the meal, and the responsibility, with her. Horrified by what they hear, the people leave without touching the meat, and the mother and her action become a source of great sadness, rather than provoking strong moral objections. See *The Jewish War, Books IV-VII*, trans. by H. St. J. Thackeray (London: Heineman, 1928, repr. 1968), 6. 201-13, pp. 434-7. In the Middle English retelling of the Siege of Jerusalem this scene is used to emphasise the brutality of the Jews in Jerusalem and is presented as the final reason for their tragic loss. See Elisa Narin van Court, 'The Siege of Jerusalem and Augustinian Historians: Writing about Jews in Fourteenth-Century England', *The Chaucer Review*, 29 (1995), 227-48.

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²⁴ Christopher Allmand, *Henry V* (London: Methuen, 1992), p. 125.

²⁵ It is the danger of human pride and the transience of human aspiration that becomes the central theme in the tales of the fall of Troy. See Hebron, *The Medieval Siege*, pp. 105-9.

²⁶ The last line of at least half of the *Brut* chronicles that end in 1419. See Matheson, *The Prose Brut*, pp. 106-34.