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## ‘But Who Will Bell the Cat?’: Deschamps, Brinton, Langland, and the Hundred Years’ War

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## **‘But Who Will Bell the Cat?’: Deschamps, Brinton, Langland, and the Hundred Years War**

Elizaveta Strakhov

Surprisingly little work has been done on William Langland and contemporary responses to the Hundred Years War: surprising not in the least because this war was a dominant international political conflict over the course of the poet’s lifetime and because Langland openly references the famous Treaty of Brétigny in the continuation of the Meed episode in Passus III. In that passus, Meed invokes the Treaty as part of her defense of meed, and its centrality to good administrative rule, before the king at Westminster. She accuses Conscience of having demurred from battle for fear of a ‘dym cloude’ (B. 3. 193), which has been understood as a topical allusion to the so-called ‘Black Monday’ storm that beset Edward III’s troops at Chartres on April 13, 1360, just before the signing of the Treaty of Brétigny, much remarked upon by contemporary chroniclers.<sup>1</sup> Meed goes on to accuse Conscience of having persuaded the king ‘to leven his lordshipe for a litel silver’ (B. 3. 207) and, far more unambiguously in the C-text, of having counseled him ‘to leten | In his enemyes handes his heritage of Fraunce’ (C. 3. 242-43), a direct reference to the terms of the Treaty of Brétigny, in which Edward renounced his claim to the French throne.<sup>2</sup> Meed thus denounces the terms of the treaty as unprofitable to Edward III and claims that, had she been ‘marchal of his men’ (B.3.201; C adds ‘in Fraunce’, 3. 258), Edward would have been ‘lord of that lond in lengthe and in brede’ (B. 3. 203).

According to Denise Baker, Meed’s arguments echo contemporary backlash to the Treaty of Brétigny in the *Prophecy of John Bridlington*, in the *Anonimale Chronicle*, and in Thomas Gray’s *Scalacronica*.<sup>3</sup> Meed’s further characterization of Conscience as a pillager based out of Calais (B.3.195-6), Baker suggests, speaks to widespread English critique of chevauchée tactics, in which English soldiers plundered the French countryside and took prisoners for exorbitant ransom.<sup>4</sup> Baker thus proposes that Langland’s political concerns extend beyond England’s domestic difficulties into the wider arena of England’s war campaigns on the Continent. In what follows, I would like to press on the notion of Langland as a poet invested in cross-Channel wartime affairs by reading him in the context of another contemporary literary response to the Hundred Years War, this one originating on the Continent.

In addition to Meed’s self-defense in Passus 3, Langland pointedly mentions France within a political context elsewhere: in the famous episode of the Rodent Parliament from the Prologue, in which the rodents entertain the notion of belling the cat so that they can be better prepared for its unexpected attacks. Scholars have tended to analyze this scene as concerned with exclusively insular English politics, specifically the rise of John of Gaunt in the final years of

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<sup>1</sup> See Baker, ‘Meed’ and Bennett, ‘Date of A-Text’; cf. Sumption, *Hundred*, 2, 443, n. 73. All quotations of the B-text from *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. Schmidt. See, however, Selzer who advances the argument that Conscience is Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March, who was Marshal of the English armies in France from 1369-1376 and who headed an unsuccessful campaign in Normandy in 1374-75; such an interpretation accords with Meed’s claim that she would make a better ‘marchal’ and the fact that she locates the ‘cabane’, in which Conscience hides for cold, ‘in Normandie’ (B.3. 189-91); the treaty in question is thus the Treaty of Bruges in 1375: ‘Topical’, pp. 262-64 and n. 24. See also Andrew Galloway’s contribution to this essay cluster.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations of the C-text from *Piers Plowman*, ed. Pearsall. See Bennett, ‘Date of A-Text’ and Galloway, *Penn*, pp. 318-24.

<sup>3</sup> Baker, ‘Meed’, pp. 57-60.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, ‘Meed’, pp. 60ff. See also Wallace, ‘Chaucer, Langland’, and Steiner, *Reading*, pp. 47-51.

Edward's reign and the Good Parliament of 1376. The episode's reliance on the popular animal fable of 'belling the cat' has been connected with Thomas Brinton's use of the same fable in his sermon of May 18, 1376 while the Good Parliament was in session. Yet there is also another feature in common between Langland's Prologue and Brinton's sermon that has received less attention: namely, that *both* make pointed references to Anglo-French political relations in their use of this animal fable. Moreover, there is yet a third author who employs the fable of 'belling the cat' in explicit reference to the Hundred Years War: the French poet Eustache Deschamps. All three figures are writing in the late 1370s-1380s, and, as I will show, all three use the same fable to discuss cross-Channel political concerns despite the fact that their available literary sources for this particular fable tend to apply to politics but in the loosest sense or else pertain specifically to clerical, rather than governmental abuses.

My aim here is not to argue that Deschamps and Langland, or Deschamps and Brinton, had any kind of direct communication, an enticing but ultimately unsustainable conclusion. That Deschamps is certainly aware of English literary culture is evidenced by his infamous address to Chaucer, in which he calls him a 'grant translateur'.<sup>5</sup> That said, there is no evidence to suggest that Deschamps knew English well enough to read in it, save a few heavily Gallicized words that he places into the mouths of some taunting English soldiers in Calais.<sup>6</sup> Rather, my aim is simply to ruffle some rigidly nationalist categories. As the paucity of scholarly material on Langland and the Hundred Years War suggests, we do not tend to read Langland as a poet with much interest in the political climate beyond his own native England. Deschamps too, with the exception of his 'Ballade to Chaucer', tends to be read within a Continental French context, alongside his fellow French contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> There is also the obvious issue of literary form: if Brinton and Langland can make sense together as an English preacher and an English author deeply invested in homiletic and devotional poetics, then Deschamps, whose immense literary output largely consists of the popular French short-form lyrics known as the *formes fixes* treating courtly and political themes, certainly emerges as the odd man out. The presence of the same animal fable in similar contexts but in the work of three very different authors is thus all the more deserving of our attention. It shows us that poets as disparate as Langland and Deschamps are, nevertheless, contemporaries in the truest sense of the term, evidently reading the same texts and putting them to similar political uses. Indeed, it shows us that the Hundred Years War in fact produces a shared literary culture.

## I. Medieval Sources for the "Belling the Cat" Fable

While the fable of 'belling the cat' was widely known in late medieval England as well as in France, its available sources offer but general moralistic applications rather than the specific brand of topicality demonstrated by Langland, Brinton, and Deschamps. The fable's most popular source is a late-twelfth century Latin verse rendering of the Aesopic fables, known alternately as the 'Esopus', 'Ysopet', the 'verse Romulus', the 'Anonymus Neveleti', or the

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<sup>5</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 2, 138-39 (no. 285). On this ballade, see, in particular, Kooijman, 'Envoi', Calin, 'Deschamps' Ballade', and Butterfield, *Familiar*, pp. 143-51.

<sup>6</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 5, 48-49 (no. 868), 79-80 (no. 893). Cf. Wallace's suggestion that the exaggerated Gallicization of the English in Deschamps' poetry underscores his lack of knowledge of the language in 'Chaucer and Deschamps', pp. 187-88.

<sup>7</sup> Deschamps' relationship to Chaucer remains the exception: see, among other, Crepin, 'Chaucer et Deschamps', Coleman, 'Flower' and Olson, 'Deschamps' *Art de Dictier*'.

‘Pseudo-Gualterus Anglicus’, and it is extant in over 200 manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> It was translated into French in the fourteenth century by an anonymous author who dedicates his text to Jeanne of Burgundy and Bonne of Luxembourg, as well as into Middle High German by Ulrich Boner.<sup>9</sup> In this Latin verse version, the mice hold a ‘concilium’ (‘parlement’ in the French translation) and decide to bell the cat to protect themselves.<sup>10</sup> Pleased with their plan, they leave the assembly and are met by a wise, old mouse, who asks for a report of the proceedings. The wise mouse then wonders who, specifically, will be the one to bell the cat, and no one steps forward. The fable’s moral warns against passing laws which are then never executed.

The *Parabola*e of the English preacher Odo of Cheriton, composed after 1225, have an almost identical version of the fable. In this version, however, the rodents’ assembly is allegorized in the context of clerical, rather than governmental abuses: clerks and monks, Odo tells us, decide to oppose an unsatisfactory bishop, prior, or abbot, but when it comes to determining who will actually voice the grievances, no one is willing to come forward, ‘et sic minores permittunt maiores uiuere et presse’ (and it is thus that men of lower station allow those higher up to live on and prevail over them).<sup>11</sup> A similar version is found, in a slightly expanded treatment, in the *Summa Praedicatorum*, a compendium for preachers composed by John Bromyard, an English Dominican friar of the early fourteenth century, where the moral also refers to the uselessness of projected but unexecuted counsel.<sup>12</sup> The fable also occurs in the *Dialogus Creaturarum*, another Latin animal fable collection of the late fourteenth century, in which the moral to the fable, in a version similar to the others, urges less talk and more direct action.<sup>13</sup>

The English Franciscan Nicholas Bozon’s rendition from the early fourteenth century, composed in macaronic Anglo-French, is the only one to have a slightly different version. It runs along much the same lines, but the ‘who will bell the cat?’ question is generalized, rather than placed into the mouth of a single rodent, and the creatures have an additional reason for belling: they intend by it also to honor the feline, here named ‘Sir Badde’. Bozon goes on to add that, as a result of the rodents’ inaction, the cat continues to terrorize them. Bozon’s version thus expresses the same idea as the other versions but underscores that the feline is ultimately unstoppable. Bozon has his fable occur in a section entitled ‘contra pusillamines subditos et prelatos’ (against cowardly subjects and prelates).<sup>14</sup>

These are the known sources and analogues for the fable that would have been available to Langland, Brinton, and Deschamps. Bozon’s Anglo-French text is the outlier among them, while the rest seem to be adaptations of the Latin verse ‘Esopus’ tradition. It is interesting to note that three of these sources were authored by English figures: Odo, Bozon, and Bromyard. In each of these versions, however, the moral is not applying to any topical political event, though a tradition of applying it to issues of clerical and governmental abuses is evident. The choices of Deschamps, Brinton, and Langland to use the fable topically thus seem to be lying primarily with them.

<sup>8</sup> For a full list of extant manuscripts, see Hervieux, *Fabulistes*, 1, 503-602 and Dicke and Grubmüller, *Fabeln*, pp. lxvi-lxviii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ysopet-Avionnet*, pp. 9-43, esp. 31-32, and Baum, ‘Fable’, pp. 464-65.

<sup>10</sup> Text from *Ysopet-Avionnet*, pp. 190-92.

<sup>11</sup> Latin text from Hervieux, *Fabulistes*, 4, 225-26; English translation from *Fables*, ed. Jacobs, pp. 129-30.

<sup>12</sup> Text from Bromyard, *Summa*, fol. 155r.

<sup>13</sup> Text from Baum, ‘Fable’, p. 466.

<sup>14</sup> Text from Bozon, *Contes*, pp. 143-45. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Latin and French my own.

## II. Deschamps's "Merveilleux Parlement" and Crossing the Channel

Of our three authors, Deschamps's use of the fable is the one that most immediately announces its connection to cross-Channel wartime concerns. Ballade 58 gives the fable in a version consistent with the Latin 'Esopus', in which Deschamps' mice hold a 'merveilleux parlement' (l. 2); the refrain to the whole lyric is 'qui pendra la sonnette au chat' (who will bell the cat). The ballade concludes with an envoy addressed to a 'prince' about the importance of executing counsel.<sup>15</sup> Deschamps develops the same idea more fully in Ballade 1085, also ending with an envoy to a 'prince', in which he references belling the cat in passing as an allegory for his larger meaning.<sup>16</sup> These two treatments demonstrate Deschamps' familiarity with the interpretation of the fable as a call to action, observable in the Latin 'Esopus', its French translation, as well as in Odo, Bromyard, and the *Dialogus Creaturarum*.

Deschamps also, however, alludes to the fable indirectly in one of his political beast allegories that forms part of a larger cluster of war lyrics, in which Deschamps calls upon the French to cross the Channel in order to conquer England and finally bring an end to the interminable war.<sup>17</sup> In Ballade 1145, Deschamps exhorts the French not to balk before the threat of wind and frost (l. 5) and not to tarry any longer because waiting to fight in bad weather only increases fear in the heart of the soldiers. As he summarizes in a punning refrain: 'Vaillant cuer puet en tous temps faire guerre' (a brave heart can wage war in all times/any kind of weather).<sup>18</sup> In Ballade 253, meanwhile, Deschamps dramatizes Caesar's invasion of Gaul, in which he has Caesar predict that conquest will be easy because, as Caesar says in what becomes the ballade's refrain, 'François perdent leur temps a conseilier' (The French lose time in holding council). Caesar goes on to add that the French not only debate in council too much, but they also do not put their deliberations to any kind of action (ll. 15-16); thus, Deschamps warns, Gaul was lost to Rome, for lack of an 'executeur' (l. 22: executor).<sup>19</sup>

These themes, and their relevance to our subject, come to a head in Ballades 1059 and 1060, both beast allegories. In Ballade 1059, the lion (representing France) orders his animal subjects to attack the leopard (England), but each animal then offers a different reason for holding off on the attack: it is already winter (ll. 9-10), the ships are dangerous (l. 12), there are not enough provisions (l. 13) or funds (l. 14). In the envoy, Deschamps exhorts the lion to provide his armies with what they need for a successful campaign.<sup>20</sup> In Ballade 1060, two sentries are looking down on a line of ten thousand rats and mice, huddled on the beach, gazing out over the water.<sup>21</sup> The sentries remark, with amazement, that the rats and mice, who usually fearlessly eat and pillage everything they find, are trembling with fear and refusing to swim. The sentries posit that the rodents' demurrals must be due to the lack of provisions on their ships and the approach of winter. I.S. Laurie reads this whole cluster as a response to the failed plans for invading England from across the Channel in the seaside town of Sluys. This was a campaign planned in 1385 and again in 1386, but it was plagued both times by lengthy delays and had to be abandoned due to loss of provisions and the approach of winter.<sup>22</sup> In such a way, Laurie argues,

<sup>15</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 1, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 5, 388-90, ll. 13-14.

<sup>17</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 1, 106-07 (no. 26), 136-137 (no. 48), 156-57 (no. 62).

<sup>18</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 6, 73-74.

<sup>19</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 2, 90-91. See also 2, 92-93 (no. 254).

<sup>20</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 5, 350-51.

<sup>21</sup> Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 5, 351-52.

<sup>22</sup> Sumption, *Hundred*, 3, 537-94.

Deschamps' rendition of the 'belling the cat' fable is to be understood in the context of this failed Sluys expedition, which would make Deschamps' cat the king of England.<sup>23</sup>

Deschamps is particularly troubled, throughout the cluster, by the failure of Charles VI, the figure behind his unnamed 'prince' and 'lion', to take decisive action. Deschamps wants Charles VI to launch a focused attack on English soil in order to shift the theater of war, which was taking place entirely on the Continent.<sup>24</sup> Deschamps thus offers the fable a readily topical application, in which its broader moral of taking direct action is linked to France's failure to execute a planned naval invasion that would, in Deschamps' opinion, finally bring the lengthy war to its much desired conclusion.

### III. Langland's Rodent Parliament, Thomas Brinton, and the Good Parliament of 1376

Langland's topical use of the Rodent Parliament closely tracks with that of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester, who used it in a sermon delivered on May 18, 1376, while the Good Parliament was in session.<sup>25</sup> In his sermon, Brinton laments Parliament's practice of identifying legal misconduct and corruption but failing to execute measures to punish malefactors and to cease abuses.<sup>26</sup> Brinton goes on to caution Parliament to avoid comporting itself like the fabled 'parliament of rats and mice' and retells the fable in a version consistent with that of the Latin 'Esopus'.<sup>27</sup> Brinton subsequently remarks on the parlous state of the realm, in which the king is in financial trouble while being governed by corrupt counselors who have illegally enriched themselves and in which 'the keys of the kingdom should hang at the girdle of one woman'.<sup>28</sup> His sermon is thus understood to be a direct exhortation to the Good Parliament of 1376, at which the Commons had, not a week before Brinton's sermon, protested taxation, denounced Edward III's advisory circle on charges of corruption, accused William Latimer and Richard Lyons of war profiteering, and vilified Alice Perrers for accepting bribes.<sup>29</sup> Brinton was himself involved in the Good Parliament: the Parliament Rolls list 'L'evesqe de Roucestre' as a trier of petitions.<sup>30</sup>

Langland's rendering of the 'belling the cat' fable is substantially different from that of Brinton, as well as of Deschamps and the other available sources for the fable, though it too, like Brinton's version, is evidently treating the events of the Good Parliament of 1376. Langland's Rodent Parliament episode is significantly more extensive and features more figurative language, particularly in its emphatic description of the cat's viciously callous torment of the rodents (B. Plg. 149-55). Again, as elsewhere, no rodent dares come forward to bell the cat, but the inaction is generalized, as in Bozon's version. There is a lone, final speaker in the episode, a mouse 'that much good kouthe, as me tho thoughte' (B. Plg. 182), but its advice to the other rodents is markedly different from the discourse of the wise old mouse in the other sources. Rather than chide the rodents for failing to bell the cat, Langland's mouse instead admonishes them for their folly in attempting to do so: even if you get rid of one cat, more will come, the mouse says; it is

<sup>23</sup> Laurie, 'Eustache Deschamps', pp. 17-19.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Deschamps, *Œuvres*, 3, 155-57 (no. 387), a dream vision in which the Dreamer sees a beautiful headless body prone in a field, beset by Lacheté (Cowardice). Deschamps identifies this figure as France in the envoy.

<sup>25</sup> On dating the sermon, see Kellogg, 'Bishop Brunton'.

<sup>26</sup> Latin text in *Sermons*, ed. Devlin, 2, 315-21; English translation in Wenzel, *Preaching*, pp. 241-54.

<sup>27</sup> Wenzel, *Preaching*, p. 246.

<sup>28</sup> Wenzel, *Preaching*, p. 253.

<sup>29</sup> *Anonimale*, pp. 85-88; see further Holmes, *Good Parliament*, pp. 102-03; Butt, *History*, pp. 344-46.

<sup>30</sup> *Parliament Rolls*, ed. Ormrod, p. 297. On Brinton's career, see Devlin, 'Bishop Thomas Brunton'.

therefore better to maintain the present situation and to let the cat snack on rabbits, rather than risk incurring his displeasure, particularly since the rodents are unable to self-govern anyways (B. Plg. 185-201).

Scholars have tended to agree that Brinton must be Langland's most immediate source for using the fable in this context.<sup>31</sup> Ralph Hanna, however, points out that, immediately after retelling the 'belling the cat' fable, Brinton offers the advice 'Benefac et bene habe' (do well and have well), the very same phrase given by the priest to Piers as a vernacularization of what is written on the Pardon (B.7. 112). 'Benefac et bene habe', Hanna argues, is an uncommon formulation, appearing otherwise only in London, British Library, MS Egerton 613, a thirteenth-century devotional tract; he thus suggests that Brinton may have picked up the fable from reading Langland, rather than the other way around.<sup>32</sup>

Brinton's rendering, moreover, as we can see, owes a clear literary debt to the Latin 'Esopus'. That of Langland seems to be a more hybrid product. On the one hand, the presence of the lone mouse at the end recalls the wise old mouse of the Latin 'Esopus'. The lone mouse's defeatist position, however, rather echoes the pessimistic outlook of Bozon's rendition. Elizabeth Orsten has already noted that Langland's rodents' association of the belled collar they intend to put on the cat with the Londoners who wear 'beighes ful brighte' (B.Plg. 161) speaks to Bozon's mice who want to honor the cat with their collar, which suggests that it is intended to be fancy and decorative.<sup>33</sup> But Bozon's moral also concludes in the following way: 'Auxint plusurs en compaignie promettent de amender les outragez des sovereynz, mès quant veient lur presence, Clym! clam! cat lep over dam! Tache, tache! vuyle vivre en pache' (Thus many together promise to correct the excesses of sovereigns, but when they stand before them, Clym! clam! the cat leaps over the dam! Quiet, quiet! I wish to live in peace).<sup>34</sup> The source of the final line is the common Latin proverb 'audi, vide, tace, si tu vis vivere in pace' (listen, look, be quiet, if you want to live in peace).<sup>35</sup> Bozon's fable thus seems to be actively counseling inaction since any attempt to curb the cat only incites it to further aggressive attack, the sudden nature of which is underscored visually by the unexpected insertion of Middle English into the Anglo-French. In this way, Bozon's moral resonates with Langland's mouse's insistence on the cat's relentlessness. Bozon's use of linguistic code-switching, moreover, as well as his vernacularization of a Latin proverb, further speaks to Langland's own similar textual practices throughout *Piers Plowman*, pointing to a possible formal affinity between the two authors. Such echoes between Langland and Bozon suggest that we might, in the future, look to the Anglo-French homiletic literary tradition in England for potential sources and analogues to Langland's project.

Uniquely, however, Langland's fable does not simply advocate inaction before overweening sovereigns: his mouse also claims that the rodents would be wholly unable to govern themselves. The sharp critique in this statement has invited several interpretations concerning the real object of the mouse's displeasure and the extent to which the mouse ought to be read as voicing Langland's own opinions. Bernard Huppé reads the Rodent Parliament as an ironic commentary: the rodents' efforts speak to the events of the Good Parliament of 1376, by the end of which the Commons had William Latimer and Richard Lyons imprisoned and Alice

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<sup>31</sup> Owst, 'Angel', Huppé, 'Date of the B-Text', Kellogg, 'Bishop Brunton', Orsten, 'Ambiguities', and Dodd, 'Parliament'.

<sup>32</sup> Hanna, *London Literature*, pp. 251-52.

<sup>33</sup> Orsten, 'Ambiguities', pp. 221-222.

<sup>34</sup> Bozon, *Contes*, pp. 145.

<sup>35</sup> Bozon, *Contes*, pp. 280-81.

Perrers banished from court, but these decisions were swiftly overturned by John of Gaunt (Langland's cat) and his supporters at the Hilary Parliament of 1377, which also saw the detainment of Peter de la Mare, Speaker of the Commons (Langland's 'raton of renoun', who proposes belling the cat in B. 158-74).<sup>36</sup> Orsten agrees with the topical application of the fable, but reads its workings somewhat differently. She also sees the belling of the cat as allegorizing the Good Parliament of 1376, but the mouse, she claims, is not intended to represent Langland's own views on parliament; rather, the mouse, in counseling cowardly inaction, is a 'Gaunt-figure, out-Gaunting himself'. The mouse thus emblemizes the actions of the Hilary Parliament of 1377 that conceded before Gaunt's authority and undid all the previous year's efforts.<sup>37</sup> Anna Baldwin, by contrast, understands the mouse as exemplary of Langland's anti-parliamentarian views on the 'inevitability and desirability of absolutism'.<sup>38</sup>

Andrew Galloway agrees with the topical identification of the cat as Gaunt, and the kitten as Richard II, but he sees it as a more general allegory, as relevant in 1386 as in 1376, for the potential inadequacy, yet ultimate efficacy of royal power.<sup>39</sup> Anthony Gross and Gwilym Dodd, meanwhile, point to the ample evidence for special interest lobbying, cronyism, and widespread corruption within the House of Commons during this period and suggest that Langland is critiquing the failure of parliament, and especially of the Commons, to act in the actual interest of its constituents during the late 1370s.<sup>40</sup> Most recently, Nicole Lassahn offers an intriguing reading of the mouse as adhering to no coherent political position whatsoever and promoting a self-serving individualism that reflects the failure of the very notion of representative assembly and the amortisation of the concept of the "common weal" in the 1370s.<sup>41</sup>

These readings are illuminating and exhaustively documented. They all, however, pass over discussion of the primary underlying issue that, according to the *Anonimale Chronicle* as we will shortly see, impelled the Commons to voice their complaints before the Lords and Gaunt during the Good Parliament in the first place: namely, the ongoing war with France. In omitting any discussion of the Hundred Years War, these previous readings are symptomatic of Langland studies' predilection for focusing on internal English politics, despite the fact that Langland openly alludes to the war with France in the Rodent Parliament itself. After the rats and mice decide to bell the cat, and even purchase the bell itself, they balk, as in all versions of the fable, but Langland's word choice for this moment is curious: 'Ther ne was raton in al the route, for al the reaume of Fraunce, | That dorste have bounden the belle aboute the cattes nekke, | Ne hangen it aboute his hals al Engeland to wynne ...' (B. Plg. 177-79). The whole episode has ostensibly been treating domestic English politics: the callous cat as Gaunt, the kitten as Richard in his minority, the Londoners with the 'beighes ful brighte' as Gaunt's retinue with their famous golden SS necklaces.<sup>42</sup> The mention of the "reaume of Fraunce" thus seems wholly out of place in this insular parliamentary context, particularly as joined with the phrase 'al Engeland to wynne' with its overtones of wartime conflict and conquest. This moment occurs, we note, at the climax of the animal fable, when the rodents find themselves unable to carry out their plan of belling the cat.

<sup>36</sup> Huppé, 'Date of the B-Text'. On the Hilary Parliament, see Holmes, *Good Parliament*, pp. 178-94; Butt, *History*, pp. 351-54; and Sumption, *Hundred*, 3, pp. 263-65, 270-77.

<sup>37</sup> Orsten, 'Ambiguities', p. 237.

<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, *Government*, pp. 16-18, citation on 18.

<sup>39</sup> Galloway, *Penn*, pp. 135-36.

<sup>40</sup> Gross, 'Langland's Rats' and Dodd, 'Parliament'.

<sup>41</sup> Lassahn, 'Langland's Rats Revisited'.

<sup>42</sup> Galloway, *Penn*, p. 139.



The two lines immediately following these sudden references to the ‘reaume of Fraunce’ and to ‘winning’ England emphasize an underlying cross-Channel subtext only further. They describe the pusillanimous rodents, who ‘helden hem unhardy and hir conseil feble, | And leten hire labour lost and al hire longe studie’ (B. Plg. 180-81). As Galloway notes, these lines echo a line in French, also cited by Chaucer in the ‘Parson’s Tale’: ‘[...] well may that man that no good werk ne dooth synge thilke newe Frenshe song, “Jay tout perdu mon temps et mon labour” [I have completely lost my time and my labor]’ (‘Parson’s Tale’, l. 247).<sup>43</sup> The wise mouse appears on the scene in the very next line, its discourse to the other rodents thus presaged, in the text, by direct invocations of France and a line that echoes a French song used by an English contemporary of Langland. The notion of France thus appears to have something to do with the rodents’ faltering in belling their cat. Might the Hundred Years War be what further subtends the anxiety over ineffective parliamentary procedure and administrative dysfunction in this rendition of the ‘belling the cat’ fable, similar to what we have already seen in Deschamps’ use of the same?

Remarkably, unexpected references to French rule likewise come up in Brinton’s sermon, which had also seemed to be concerned purely with insular politics and the threat of Alice Perrers. In describing the corrupting influence of counselors and of Perrers on Edward III, Brinton contrasts the current state of affairs in England unfavorably with that of France. Brinton bemoans the difficulty of gaining audience with the king and decries the excessive power wielded over the king and his family by exorbitantly wealthy and evil-minded counselors. Meanwhile in France, he points out, ‘[t]he king of France grants audience to his people three times a week and personally gives full justice to all who ask for it, while the noblemen of England cannot gain their rights, though they ask for them with all their power’.<sup>44</sup> Brinton then goes on to contrast – still unfavorably – the governments of Edward III and Charles V, lamenting: ‘[...] is it a just order when the king of France has for his privy council seventy men chosen from every state of life, by whose advice all difficult matters are settled, while the king of England, though he has prudent and faithful councillors and officials, acts in like difficulties by the council of only one [...]?’<sup>45</sup> Brinton’s critique of administrative mismanagement in England is thus being constructed in both of these moments against contemporary practices in France, so that his discussion of insular politics too opens itself up to admit a profound interest in England’s warring neighbor across the Channel.

I propose then another reading of the mouse’s warning to its fellow rodents concerning the ultimate usefulness of submitting to authority and the inability of the rodents’ to self-govern that might make sense of these strange invocations of France. Langland’s mouse is neither pro-royalist nor anti-parliamentarian: it is simply reminding the other rodents that the wartime state of the realm demands a strong ruler, with whose authority the rodents need to comply for the greater good of England in its ongoing conflict with France. If we accept the topical application of the fable to the events of the Good Parliament of 1376 and the Hilary Parliament of 1377, then we cannot get away from the critical issues, continuously voiced in parliament in precisely this period, surrounding the Hundred Years War. The war with France had been going on continuously in favor of the French since 1369, and the early 1370s brought a series of major losses for the English: the naval battle of La Rochelle and the reconquest of Poitou and

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<sup>43</sup> Galloway, *Penn*, pp. 139-40. The French line, by itself, also occurs in Chaucer’s ‘Fortune’, l. 7. Quotations from *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson. On labor and French songs, see R.D. Perry’s contribution to this essay cluster.

<sup>44</sup> Wenzel, *Preaching*, p. 253.

<sup>45</sup> Wenzel, *Preaching*, p. 253.

surrounding areas by Bertrand du Guesclin in 1372, as well as the reconquest of tracts of English-controlled Brittany by du Guesclin in 1373, which left Saint-Sauveur as the dominant English foothold in northwestern France. English attempts to reverse the situation in 1373-74, the main expedition led notably by Gaunt himself, amounted to little and incurred great losses of manpower. In particular, a costly 1374 expedition to relieve English forces garrisoned at Bécherel and at Saint-Sauveur in Normandy was delayed in the winter of 1374-75, and Bécherel was subsequently lost. The Good Parliament itself took place not a month after the failure of year-long papal-brokered peace talks between England and France at Bruges, which resulted in but two brief truce agreements and further involved the sale and surrender of Saint-Sauveur to the French in 1375 when the truce failed to be observed.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, our most comprehensive documentation of the Good Parliament, derived from the account of a possible eyewitness, the war was everywhere central to the Commons' litany of complaints before the Lords and John of Gaunt.<sup>47</sup> The *Anonimalle*'s account of the parliament is immediately preceded by mention of the Bruges talks, which are dismissed as having been 'a excessive costage saunz profit' (at excessive cost without profit).<sup>48</sup> The text then details the very first oration of the Good Parliament, by John Knyvet, Chancellor of England, before both houses and the king, which Knyvet opens by emphasizing that England is in imminent danger from France, Spain, Gascony, Flanders, and Scotland, and he therefore asks the king's help.<sup>49</sup> When the Commons retire to private session, the first person to speak there opens his address to the Commons assembly by protesting the imposition of any more subsidies because 'toute qe nous avoms done a la guerre par longe tenps avoms perdu' (everything we have given towards the war for a long time, we have lost).<sup>50</sup> The *Anonimalle* then has Peter de la Mare's first expression of the Commons' demands before the Lords and Gaunt begin in the following manner:

Et quaunt a nostre mater nous sumez avyse par nostre conseil la ou nostre seignur le roy demaunde une disme et une quinzime et le custome des layns et des chescune livere de marchaundys xii deniers pur sa guerre mayntener encontre ses enemys, nous dioms qe, sil fuist bien governe od ses ministres et soun tresor loialment et saunz gaste despendu, ne serroit poynt meistre defair tiel chevauns [...]

And as regards our matter we have been advised by our counsel that, where our lord the king asks for a tenth and a fifteenth and the tax on wool and twelve pennies from every pound of merchandise to maintain his war against his enemies, we say that, had he been well governed by his counselors and his treasury spent faithfully and not plundered, there would be no need at all to make such a loan [...]<sup>51</sup>

The Commons went on to center their complaints against Lyons and Latimer on the issues of evading the Calais Staple, war profiteering in Normandy, and the losses of Bécherel and Saint-Sauveur.<sup>52</sup> In this way, the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, our most detailed and potentially eyewitness source for the Good Parliament, presents the Commons' accusations as revolving around – and,

<sup>46</sup> For detailed discussion of these unsuccessful campaigns, failed peace-talks at Bruges and the lead-up to the Good Parliament, see Holmes, *Good Parliament*, p. 33-62 and Sumption, *Hundred*, 3, pp. 212-38, 249-52.

<sup>47</sup> On the eyewitness nature of the account, see 'Introduction' to *Anonimalle*, pp. xliii-xlv.

<sup>48</sup> *Anonimalle*, p. 79.

<sup>49</sup> *Anonimalle*, p. 80.

<sup>50</sup> *Anonimalle*, p. 81.

<sup>51</sup> *Anonimalle*, p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> *Anonimalle*, pp. 85, 93-94, cf. *Parliament Rolls*, ed. Ormrod, 5, 300-306; see further Holmes, *Good Parliament*, pp. 108-14, 126-34; Butt, *History*, pp. 345-49, *Parliament Rolls*, ed. Ormrod, 5, 289-94; and Sumption, *Hundred*, 3, 252-262.

indeed, directly originating from – immense displeasure with how the English government was going about funding the war effort and executing military strategy and diplomacy. Similarly the Parliament Rolls present the issue of the ongoing war as the third of the three main reasons for convening parliamentary sessions in 1376.<sup>53</sup> Like the *Anonimalle*, the Rolls continuously bring up the war in connection with the royal demands for subsidy.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, Thomas Walsingham's account in the *Chronicon Angliae* appears less invested in this aspect of the Good Parliament: Walsingham's rendition of the same events focuses on the royal request for a subsidy, without reference to what the subsidy is to be used for.<sup>55</sup> He does, however, have Peter de la Mare state that the imposition of further taxes would only have been acceptable 'si in expediens rebus bellicis [...] tanta pecunia fuisset expensa' (if the money had been spent in furthering the war effort [...]).<sup>56</sup> When he gets to the death of the Black Prince, however, Walsingham's concerns about the Hundred Years War flare: he speaks at some length of Edward's prowess in battle and of the newfound vulnerability of England to French attack in the wake of the Black Prince's death.<sup>57</sup> The *Chronicon Angliae*, then, while it does not adduce the war as central to the Commons' concerns in the manner of the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, registers a similar sense of gloom surrounding English war fortunes in 1376.

Brinton's own unexpected inclusion of references to contemporary French rule in his sermon, delivered in response to the Good Parliament at which he was himself present, is a further independent textual witness to the way in which French matters were suffusing the air during parliamentary deliberations in 1376. Meanwhile, in the period of time between the Good Parliament and the succeeding Hilary Parliament, negotiations for peace at Bruges continued ineffectually amid growing English fears of resumption of war by the French, and the death of Edward III was followed by heavy naval raids along the English coast.<sup>58</sup>

I submit therefore that the strangely defeatist position of Langland's mouse, introduced, we recall, by that seemingly random allusion to the 'reaume of Fraunce' and to the 'winning' of 'all Engelonde', might be productively read within this wartime context, rather than as solely a response to domestic parliamentary politics. Matthew Giancarlo has already suggested that we understand the scene of Meed's trial as no typical trial in a court of justice, but specifically a trial enacted before a parliament. Such a setting, Giancarlo argues, explains why Meed responds with a counter-accusation concerning the Treaty of Brétigny: because arguments over decisions surrounding the Hundred Years War heavily preoccupied all parliamentary debates in the late 1370s.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, an overtly wartime context helps explain several points made by Langland's mouse: namely, the inexplicable reference to the rabbits that the cat will catch when not attacking rodents; the sudden introduction of the kitten, i.e. Richard II, into the discussion, and the insistence that the rodents are incapable of self-rule. The mouse is suggesting, quite simply, that while the realm is in danger from outside forces, no attempts ought to be made to rock the boat internally; rather, the cat ought to be left alone to go after 'conynges' (B. Plg. 189). The identity of the rabbits has caused some speculation among earlier scholars, but in the 1408 Middle English translation of Vegetius' *De re militari*, found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS

<sup>53</sup> *Parliament Rolls*, ed. Ormrod, 5, 295.

<sup>54</sup> *Parliament Rolls*, ed. Ormrod, 5, 297-98.

<sup>55</sup> *St Albans*, 1, 2-9.

<sup>56</sup> *St Albans*, 1, 10-11.

<sup>57</sup> *St Albans*, 1, 36-37.

<sup>58</sup> Holmes, *Good Parliament*, pp. 161-65.

<sup>59</sup> Giancarlo, *Parliament*, pp. 190-92.

Douce 291 and possibly authored by John Walton, ‘conynges’ is given on fol. 107r as another term for ‘minours’ or soldiers who tunnel into a city or armed fortification.<sup>60</sup> I suggest, therefore, that the rabbits are to be understood as none other than French soldiers.<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, the unexpected presence of a new feline, unmistakably pointing to Richard II, speaks to the concerns that we have already seen in Walsingham’s account over what dire effects the death of the Black Prince – and, thus, the accession of a child king – might have on England’s fortunes in the war. The reprimand concerning the rodents’ self-rule, meanwhile, echoes fears that we have already witnessed in Deschamps’ beast allegories: that a nation at war is dependent for its success on a strong ruler at its head in order to guide it to victory. We recall that the Rodent Parliament episode is introduced by a declaration from the ‘aungel en heigh’ that ‘rex’ comes from ‘regere’ and that unless a king enforces his laws, he will be king in name only (B. 141-42). Such an introduction to the rodent fable, along with the mouse’s lament ‘Ther the cat is a kitoun, the court is ful elenge ... Ve terre ubi puer est rex! [Woe to the land where a child is king: Eccl. 10.16]’ (B. 194-96) suggest that Langland’s primary object of concern here is the strength of royal power at this point in time.

Finally, such a reading also helps explain the mouse’s closing argument concerning the willingness to eat costs: ‘And though it costned me catel, biknowen it nolde, | But suffren as hymself wolde so doon as hym liketh – | Coupled and uncoupled to cacche what thei mowe’ (B. 205-07). The mouse suggests that certain expenses are going to be necessary to let cats go about their business of catching whatever they can. Thus, if the rabbits are the French, then the mouse is urging the rodent assembly to assent to the subsidies, despite their oppressive nature, so that the cat can go hunting. Taken in the context of England’s reversal of wartime fortunes in the early 1370s, of the failure of peace negotiations at Bruges, and of the recent deaths of Edward the Black Prince and of Edward III, the discourse of Langland’s mouse reads like a plea for domestic stability as an important safeguard in a period of immense external threat to the futures of the realm. The rodents, the mouse suggests, have bigger things to worry about than controlling their cat and should instead leave the cat to do what cats do best: kill.

Reading Langland’s mouse in the context of cross-Channel wartime parliamentary concerns allows us directly to link the invocation of France in the Rodent Parliament with Meed’s discussion of the Treaty of Brétigny in Passus 3. In this way, the topical references to the Hundred Years War in Passus 3 no longer register as unique and anomalous but are instead foreshadowed already by the Prologue. This clear topical association between the Prologue and Passus 3 lends support to Emily Steiner’s suggestion that the two episodes should be read together as both attempting to model ‘a new discourse of political counsel’.<sup>62</sup> This proximity between the two episodes suggests in turn that Langland’s cross-Channel political concerns are not confined to just one place within the poem but play out across its entire opening section.

#### IV. Conclusion: Bridging the Channel

As this discussion has sought to show, the fable of ‘belling the cat’ became politically expedient to figures on both sides of the Channel in responding to the ongoing threat of the

<sup>60</sup> See the entries for *coning* in the *OED* and *MED*. On this translation, see Allmand, *De Re Militari*, pp. 185-87 and Hanna, ‘Thomas Berkeley’, pp. 899-902.

<sup>61</sup> A comparison of French soldiers to rabbits also occurs in one of the Harley 2253 lyrics, ‘Lustneth, lordinges, both younge and olde’ (l. 81), text in *Harley 2253*, ed. Fein. I thank Daniel Davies for drawing my attention to this.

<sup>62</sup> Steiner, *Reading*, p. 51.

Hundred Years War. Three vastly distinct figures – a French poet working in the Continental *formes fixes* tradition, an English bishop and preacher, and an English poet working in the Middle English alliterative tradition – all relied on the same animal fable to critique wartime administration and foreign policy. Despite the vastly different contexts in which the three place their fable – a cluster of wartime lyrics, a sermon, and a lengthy allegorical narrative poem – and despite the fable’s sources having little topical application, all three authors use the fable to the same end: to demonstrate the failure of their respective governments to act decisively in bringing the war to its much-desired end. Strikingly, Deschamps and Langland, in particular, use the fable to inveigh against identical problems: war campaigns that get bogged down for lack of well-executed governmental spending, revealing that both sides of the Channel shared remarkably similar (and familiar) frustrations concerning effective rulership, taxation, and military financing.

That Langland and Deschamps should both be using the same animal fable is not, ultimately, all that surprising. As the sources for the ‘belling the cat’ fable suggest, animal fables were an important feature of the English homiletic tradition, the influence of which is clearly observable in *Piers Plowman*, and collections of animal fables circulated in Latin and vernacular translations across Western Europe. But I would like to suggest, by way of conclusion, that the recurrence of the image of belling the cat speaks to more than just this particular fable’s popularity. Political beast allegory is vitally central to the late medieval French literary tradition in monumental works such as the *Roman de Renard* and the *Roman de Fauvel*. Furthermore, in addition to Deschamps and Langland, we find important uses of political beast allegory in the works of their fellow English contemporaries, such as Chaucer’s ‘Nun’s Priest’s Tale’ and John Gower’s opening to the *Vox Clamantis*, English contemporaries closely familiar with and heavily borrowing from the Continental French literary tradition.<sup>63</sup>

While the Rodent Parliament is the only instance of animal fable in *Piers Plowman*, its presence and resonances with Deschamps’ poetry as well as with the use of animal fable in other contemporary English poets partaking of cross-Channel literary influences, reminds us of the indelible proximity of Middle English and Continental French literary culture in the late medieval period. It reminds us that our emphasis on nationalist divisions and distinctions – ‘Langland and the French Tradition’ – is important to retain but should not obfuscate for us the porousness of cross-Channel literary culture and, still more importantly, the vast store of knowledge, source material, and cultural capital that both sides of the Channel held in common. ‘English’ and ‘French’ are geographical and linguistic categories that do not, and cannot, capture an individual medieval author in his or her expressive totality. Rather, as we continue to investigate the late medieval period, we should continually bear in mind that, despite its rich diversity, the Latin West also functioned as a multilingual monoculture, in which the Continental French literary tradition in particular played an extraordinarily central role.

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