

## INTRODUCTION

### THE POEM

John Page's *The Siege of Rouen* (NIMEV 979) is an eyewitness account of Henry V's siege of Normandy's capital 1418–19. The text is unique in English verse of the fifteenth century in providing a first-hand narrative of a significant event in contemporary warfare. The poet was (if we take him at his word) present at the siege, and his narration of the event is a complex mixture of patriotism and compassion, verse-chronicle and historical romance. It is prized as a historical source, and as a literary text is accomplished and sophisticated.

However, until recently it has received very little critical attention. The chief reason for its neglect is its preservation in the *Brut* chronicle, on the basis of the evidence of the number of surviving manuscripts the most popular medieval English secular text (second only to the Wycliffite Bible), but at the same time a text that has been dismissed by its twentieth-century editor, Friedrich W. D. Brie, as 'as worthless ... as a mediæval Chronicle possibly can be' (Brie, pp. ix–x). Mined by historians for information, dismissed by literary critics as unsophisticated, the *Brut* (and the poems preserved in it) remains something of a blind spot in the textual scholarship of the later Middle Ages. As late as 2006, William Marx and Raluca Radulescu described it as 'the most seriously neglected of the texts produced in medieval England'.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, historical literature has fallen into the gaps between the disciplines of history and literary studies. Even C. L. Kingsford, whose *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* laid so much of the groundwork for scholars of this material, and held together in its title both disciplinary priorities, kept the barriers firmly up in asserting that the 'writers who have left us history in verse, John Page, the author of *The Siege of Rouen*, and Hardyng, the Chronicler, were rather historians than poets' (Kingsford, p. 237). A second reason for the poem's neglect is that it partook of the general falling-from-favour of much medieval war poetry in the twentieth century. Laurence Minot is a classic case in point, acclaimed by his first editor as 'equal, if not superior, to any English poet before the sixteenth, or even, with very few exceptions, before the seventeenth, century', and receiving three editions before 1917, he and his work are now little studied and frequently maligned for what is perceived as their simplistic

<sup>1</sup> Marx and Radulescu 2006: xiii.