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Anthony Bale

News from the East

Presidential address 2022

ABSTRACT:

The first dateable English printed document is an indulgence to raise money against the Turks. In this essay I take this indulgence, printed by William Caxton at Westminster in 1476, as a starting-point for a reconsideration of fifteenth-century English literary and cultural representations of Rhodes and the advancing Ottoman Turks. The 1480 siege of the Hospitaller island of Rhodes was a turning-point in the production and dissemination of writing about the Turkish conquests. John Kay's *Siege of Rhodes*, printed c. 1482, reflects the interest in current affairs both at Edward IV's court and at the humanist Italian courts where Kay, Edwards's self-described laureate, had spent time.

I then introduce a letter from John Paston, describing a Turk in his household, and the fifteenth-century poem *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, to consider how the Turkish male body was represented. I argue that representations of the Turk in later fifteenth-century England reveal admiration, fear, and a sense of proximity and similarity. Such representations show how the Turk was frequently discussed in cultural discourse, and inaugurate the 'Turk' as a discursive representation in the English imagination.

The recent turn to the 'Global Middle Ages' in medieval English studies has not yet fully attended to the specifics of interactions between Latin Christendom and the Ottoman Turks. This requires an acknowledgement of the importance in later fifteenth-century England of mediated news reports concerning the growing Ottoman empire and the parlous state of Christian lands in the eastern Mediterranean.

KEYWORDS:

News, media, Rhodes, Knights Hospitaller, John Kay, Caius Auberinus, William Caxton, Greece, printing, Ottoman Empire

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1. 'A happy commerce'

The story of printing in England did not start with origin myths of Camelot or Troy, or the *Bible* or even *The Canterbury Tales*, but rather with a printed indulgence. The first datable item printed by William Caxton at Westminster was a Latin indulgence of the second half of 1476, printed within months – possibly weeks – of Caxton's arrival in Westminster from Bruges. Only one full version of the indulgence survives.¹ This was issued to Henry and

For support and advice I am grateful to Thomas Goodmann, Michelle Karnes, and Sebastian Sobocki. Warm thanks are due too to the Programme Committee and Local Organising Committee of the 2022 New Chaucer Society Congress at Durham, who provided a wonderful context in which to deliver a version of this paper. I use the following abbreviations below: ISTC: Incunabula Short Title Catalogue, via <https://data.cerl.org/istc/>; *MED*: Middle English Dictionary, via <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english->

Katherine Langley on 13th December 1476. Thus the 1476 indulgence precedes Caxton's printing of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1477) by a few months, although Caxton's preparation of the *Canterbury Tales* in late 1476 was almost certainly underway when this indulgence was being printed: in other words, the printing of this indulgence is likely to have been jobbing work, bankrolling Caxton's preparation of the much longer and more speculative product of *The Canterbury Tales*.² In adumbrating the benefits of its purchase, the 1476 indulgence includes the key phrase:

dictionary/dictionary; ODNB: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, via oxforddnb.com; TNA: The National Archives, Kew, England. For the purposes of open access, the author has applied a CC BY public copyright licence to any author-accepted manuscript arising from this submission.

¹ TNA E 135/6/56; ISTC is00163100. An image of the indulgence can be viewed at <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/significant-people-collection/william-caxton/> (accessed 18 January 2023).

² The 1476 indulgence is printed in Caxton's Type 2, as designed by Johannes Veldener and used by Caxton in Bruges. Caxton used Type 2 for his first printing in England: in four small quarto books from around this time and *The Canterbury Tales* of 1476-7. The first word in the indulgence, '[J]ohannes', is in Caxton's Type 3, also designed by Veldener, with a different lower-case 'a' and the more erect lower-case 'h'. Lotte Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England* (London: British Library, 1982), p. 51, provides further details. See too Gervase Rosser, 'A Note on the Caxton Indulgence of 1476', *The Library*, sixth series, 7 (1985), 256-8, putting Caxton's printing of the indulgence in its Westminster context.

...you have contributed a competent sum to a naval expedition and the maintenance of a fleet against the faithless Turks, the enemies of the Christian religion, from the means granted to you by God, by a happy commerce [or trafficking, *'felici commertio'*], changing earthly things into heavenly, the perishable into the abiding.³

This formula conjoins what we can identify as current affairs – the parlous state of the Christian possessions in the eastern Mediterranean and relations with the ‘faithless Turks’ – and the indulgence’s future benefit to one’s soul.

At the time of the printing of this indulgence, the Ottomans were making major gains in Christian Europe. Indeed, the swift Ottoman advance led by Mehmet II (‘the Conqueror’) following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 occasioned a trans-European crisis. Ottoman victories in the second half of the fifteenth century included the conquest of the Morea (previously a Byzantine despotate) in 1458, the siege and conquest of Trebizond in 1461, the conquest of the Genoese island of Lesbos in 1462, the siege and conquest of Venetian Negroponte/Euboea in 1470, the besieging of the Venetian-Albanian port of Shkodra/Scutari in 1474, and the conquest of the Crimea, its Genoese settlement of Caffa (Feodosia), and the Venetian port of Tana (Azov), in 1475. At the point of the printing of the Langleys’ indulgence, the Ottomans had conquered most of the Albanian coast, and were making significant inroads in Moldavia (the Christian kingdom in what is now eastern Romania, Moldova and parts of Ukraine). Moreover, the Ottomans were at a constant state of war with the Republic of Venice from 1463 to 1479, a war in which Venice was markedly unsuccessful.

³ From the translation given by A. W. Pollard, ‘An Indulgence of 1476’, *The Times* (London), 7 February 1928, p. 15.

In the period following the conquest of Constantinople, the idea of holy war or crusade underwent a fundamental shift, from being concerned with the status of Jerusalem to being concerned with the territorial threat to Europe, especially after the Ottoman occupation of Otranto in southern Italy in summer 1480, when talk arose of needing to defend Rome against a possible Turkish invasion.⁴ These events resonated throughout Christian Europe, as shown in the production of material like the 1476 indulgence. The island and fortified city of Rhodes was particularly important as the headquarters of the Knights Hospitaller, or Knight of St John, the crusader military order. The order was deeply familiar to English people, as the Hospitallers had preceptories throughout England, with their headquarters at Clerkenwell in London; they were also one of the *langues* (literally tongues, or national leagues) or groups at Rhodes, with their own auberge and military roles.⁵ Pilgrims bound for the Holy Land often called at Rhodes, and there are very many examples of Englishmen visiting the Hospitallers – for example, John Clanvowe (d. 1391), the Anglo-Welsh poet-diplomat and associated of Chaucer's, was in Rhodes on royal business in 1390.⁶

⁴ Haldun Eroglu, 'Mehmet II's campaign to Italy (1480-1481)', *Mediterranean Journal of Humanities* 2 (2011), 127-134.

⁵ Gregory O'Malley, *The Knights Hospitaller of the English Langue 1460–1565* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 12-24.

⁶ See Siegrid Düll, Anthony Luttrell, and Maurice Keen, 'Faithful Unto Death: The Tomb Slab of Sir William Neville and Sir John Clanvowe, Constantinople 1391,' *The Antiquaries Journal* 71 (1991), 174-190. Chaucer's Knight is said to have fought at Alexandria, Ayas, Satalia, and Cyprus, all battles connected with Pierre de Lusignan, King of Cyprus, who was supported by the Hospitallers; see further Anthony Luttrell, 'English Levantine Crusaders, 1363-67', *Renaissance Studies* 2 (1988), 143-53.1

The purchases of the 1476 indulgence, Henry and Katherine Langley, were evidently the kind of people who wished to contribute to an international army against the Turks, and their indulgence can be seen as a precursor of modern ‘war bonds’. We can reconstruct a good deal about the Langleys and thus gain a glimpse of the early market for this kind of printed material. To my knowledge, only one scholar, Laura Richmond, has joined the dots between the Langleys – well-known and well-off London merchants – and Caxton’s indulgence; scholars of early print have tended not to look at social history and *vice versa*.⁸ Henry Langley was a member of an Essex gentry family; the main seat was at Rickling with land-holdings throughout Essex.⁹ Katherine (d. 1511) became a vowess, possibly before her husband’s death, taking a vow of chastity and entering a spiritual union with Christ.¹⁰ As Richmond describes, Katherine’s will shows that she was involved in a religious and intellectual circle around the Cambridge theologian William Chubbes (c. 1444-1505/6) and connected to Henry VII’s mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort (also a vowed woman).¹¹ Katherine commissioned funerary monuments at the London Greyfriars and at Rickling (both

⁸ Laura [Richmond] Wood, ‘Vowesses in the province of Canterbury, c. 1450-1540’, PhD thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2017. See too Richmond’s life of Katherine Langley in *ODNB*.

⁹ TNA C 1/339/81

¹⁰ TNA SP 46/190/56.

¹¹ Wood, ‘Vowesses’, pp. 146-7; on Chubbes see *ODNB*. Katherine Langley seems to have been a kinswoman of Christopher Erswick, born in Furness (Westmoreland), Dean of Windsor and Margaret Beaufort’s confessor; Thomas Erswick’s will suggests that all his sons predeceased him, and he was survived by five daughters.

now lost); she appears with her parents on their tomb at Dagenham (Essex) as a vowess in a costume that has often been mistaken for that of a nun.¹²

Katherine Langley left a collection of indulgences and other papers, and her long and unusual will also survives.¹³ She was evidently an enthusiastic purchaser of pardons and bought a further indulgence in 1481 from the Hospitallers.¹⁴ She and her husband also purchased indulgences from the hospital of Holy Trinity and St. Thomas of Canterbury in Rome (1475), the Trinitarians of Moatenden, near Maidstone in Kent (1485) and from the Dominican order (1485);¹⁵ from the Guild of St Mary in Boston, Lincolnshire;¹⁶ a printed indulgence of 1508 for her to choose her own confessor;¹⁷ and an indulgence in 1510 from the Chapel of St Mary-in-the-Sea at Newton near Ely.¹⁸ The Langley family was very active in London and in Stepney, then a small village east of London; in her widowhood Katherine rented a house at St Bartholomew's Hospital by the London Charterhouse. Her devotional interests show that indulgences helped her 'travel', spiritually, far outside the confines of her world.¹⁹ Her indulgences seem to reflect national and international concerns, and represent

¹² Wood, 'Vowesses', p. 67.

¹³ Her papers are gathered under reference TNA C 270/32. Her will is at London Metropolitan Archives MS 9531/9, fols viii to x (3d ser.), fol. 30v.

¹⁴ TNA C270/32/13, an indulgence in manuscript.

¹⁵ TNA C 270/32/12; C 270/32/15.

¹⁶ TNA C 270/32/18.

¹⁷ TNA E 135/6/66.

¹⁸ TNA C 270/32/17.

¹⁹ On Langley, Wood, 'Vowesses', is the best source. See Mary Erler, 'Three fifteenth-century vowesses', in *Medieval London Widows 1300-1500*, in eds. Caroline M. Barron and

devotional priorities and relationships at specific moments in her life and therefore had a kind of timeliness or currentness.

Katherine's family connections are also illuminating in the context of the current discussion in helping to place the purchasers of indulgences within their literary and cultural context. Her father was Sir Thomas Urswick (d. 1479), attorney and formerly Recorder of London. A post-mortem inventory of Urswick's belongings shows that he owned a number of books, including Froissart's *Chronicles* in French, Mandeville's *Book of Marvels & Travels* in English (now Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 841), and a copy of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* which was kept in the chapel at his house at Marks (Essex).²⁰ Not only did printed indulgences like the one purchased by the Langleys play a fundamental role in the financial viability of early printing (and therefore a key supporting role in the early production of printed vernacular literature), but we often find that the audiences for luxury vernacular books were the same as or proximal to the audience for early indulgences.

This article is not about indulgences, and yet the indulgence is at once a starting point, a key motif, and a historical foundation of what follows. In this article I outline the contours of the *cultural* connection between England and the evolving situation in the eastern Mediterranean in the later fifteenth century. As well as influencing devotional culture, the Mediterranean political situation, especially the Ottoman attack on Rhodes in 1480, inspired new literary outputs and can be traced in the broader cultural imagination of the time. The

Anne F. Sutton (London: Hambledon, 1994), 165-183, on women similar to Langley. Erler observes 'the vowed life was familiar at the highest level of London's mercantile elite' (p. 166).

²⁰ TNA 154/2/2/. See Francis W. Steer, 'A medieval household: the Urswick inventory', *The Essex Review* 63 (1954), 4-20.

proximity of Rhodes – and Turks – to late medieval English culture has largely been considered only through a Hospitaller framework, whereas in this essay I seek to place writing about the Ottoman advances within the context of an emerging culture of news reporting and the emergence of contemporaneity as a facet of media.

In later fifteenth-century England (as in Germany and Flanders) the production of indulgences was part of the financial model of print and was a key aspect of late medieval textuality, supporting the more speculative activity of selling what we might now call ‘literature’. The earliest piece of dateable printed material using Gutenberg’s moveable type is also a letter of indulgence (22 October 1454) which, like the later examples from England, sought to raise money for an anti-Turkish fleet (for the defence of Cyprus rather than Rhodes).²¹ The fact that Caxton established his press at Westminster may in and of itself reveal the interplay between print and popular religion.²² The printing of indulgences and their importance to anti-Turkish fundraising provided a financial foundation for the entire enterprise of print: such ephemera are likely to have been produced in significant runs, sometimes 2 or 4 indulgences per sheet, of at least 300 to 500 sheets (so we can approximate something in the region of a minimum of 2-3000 copies of each

²¹ Janet Ing, ‘The Mainz Indulgences of 1454/5. A Review of Recent Scholarship’, *British Library Journal* 9 (1983), pp. 14–31.

²² The point is made by Rosser, ‘A Note on the Caxton *Indulgence*’ and in his *Medieval Westminster 1250-1540* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), where Rosser comments that ‘The presence of the abbey was probably not crucial to Caxton’s choice of Westminster as his base; yet this additional source of custom must have weighed in his decision’ (pp. 212-13).

indulgence).²³ There were therefore able to be mass-produced at a volume that was not true of manuscript examples although, as Alexandra Gillespie has cautioned, they remained laborious objects to produce, sometimes printed on vellum, often with wax seals and ribbons, and with a manuscript element (the names and dates, and hand finishing of initials).²⁴ Nonetheless, we can then argue that mass-produced popular religious productions were as much a part of Caxton's *oeuvre* as monumental literary outputs, and this is in keeping with the history of print in Venice and Germany, where postcards, broadsheets, indulgences, paste-in icons and *ex votos* formed the basis of early printers' outputs.

In the spring of 1480 events in the eastern Mediterranean became more acute. The Ottoman Turks began preparations to attack Rhodes, and in May they besieged the city and island. The siege, which was unsuccessful, lasted until August 1480. In the wake of the 1480

²³ David R. Carlson, 'A Theory of the Early English Printing Firm: Jobbing, Book Publishing, and the Problem of Productive Capacity in Caxton's Work', in ed. William Kuskin, *Caxton's Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 35-68, p. 41, adduces two similar examples from Spain and Sicily, in which 200,000 and 130,000 copies of indulgences were printed; only 6 examples survive of the former, and none of the latter. The more usual consensus seems to be that this kind of material was published in print runs of several thousand. See further Falk Eisermann, 'Fifty Thousand Veronicas. Print Runs of Broadsheets in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries', in ed. Andrew Pettegree, *Broadsheets: Single-Sheet Publishing in the First Age of Print* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 76-113.

²⁴ Alexandra Gillespie, 'Caxton and the Invention of Printing', in eds. Cathy Shrank and Mike Pincombe, *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21-36.

Siege, the printing of indulgences became a staple of both Caxton's output and that of other English printers. Caxton in Westminster and his competitor in London, John Lettou, printed at least 11 indulgences between 1476 and 1481, 10 of which were connected to raising money to support Rhodes in its wars against the Turks.²⁵ Apart from one indulgence (printed by Caxton in 1480 for Chaucer's Pardoner's Hospital of St Mary Rounceval at Charing) every other known printed indulgence in the first years of English print was concerned with raising money against the Turks.²⁶

One of these indulgences was printed by Caxton and dated 31 March 1480, purchased by or for Sir Simon Mountford and his wife Emma, and for the benefit of the Knights of Rhodes against the Turks.²⁷ Sir Simon was another Essex landowner, whilst Emma was the

²⁵ These indulgences are as follows: ISTC is00163100 (Caxton, 1476); ISTC ik00010800 (Caxton, 1480); ISTC ik00010750 (Caxton, 1480); ISTC ik00010300 (Caxton, 1480); ISTC ik00010400 (Lettou, 1480); ISTC ik00010500 (Lettou, 1480); ISTC ik00010600 (Caxton, 1480); ISTC ik00010700 (Lettou, 1480); ISTC ij00333250 (Caxton, 1481); ISTC ij00333300 (Caxton, 1481). These indulgences appeared in different editions, for 'singular' or 'plural' issue. Lettou, who probably arrived from Latvia or Lithuania via Rome in London around 1479, also established his printing business by printing indulgences. Likewise, Richard Pynson, in the 1490s, secured his business through printing indulgences (for example ISTC ir00203350, a 1498 indulgence for promoting war against the Turks).

²⁶ ISTC ip00935800, now Washington DC, Library of Congress, Rare Books Division.

²⁷ The unique printed indulgence is London, British Library IA.55024 (ISTC ik00010300). Versions of its text are also found in manuscript examples, such as Preston, Lancashire Record Office RCHy 3/16 (31 March 1480, to John Hawardyne). Dame Joan Plumpton also had a manuscript example, copied in the seventeenth century into the family cartulary (see

widow of John Barnewell, a wealthy London fishmonger. The Mountfords had only recently married and it is highly possible that this indulgence was purchased by or for the newlyweds as a way of signalling, celebrating, and adding to their spiritual health upon their recent marriage.

The text of the Mountfords' 1480 indulgence was highly conventional, and the formulaic nature of the text runs across many similar examples in print, in manuscript, and internationally.²⁸ The 1480 indulgence was a bestseller across Europe. The indulgence thanks the purchaser 'in consideration of [their] devotion to the Roman Church and willingness to aid the sacred and necessary expedition against the perfidious Turk and for the defence of Rhodes.' The indulgence gave the holder/purchaser the right to choose their own confessor. They would then receive an indulgence or pardon, which absolved them from all sins. They received the indulgence twice: once during their lifetime and once at the point of death.²⁹

The Mountfords' 1480 indulgence continues what the 1476 indulgence started, and the English versions of this particular indulgence were, according to its own text, authorised by a well-known Hospitaller knight, brother John Kendal (also often written as Kendale),

Plumpton Correspondence ed. Thomas Stapleton, Camden Society (London: Nichols, 1839), pp. 118-19).

²⁸ Versions of the spring 1480 indulgence, identical or nearly identical to Caxton's, were printed in Augsburg, Cologne, Louvain, Mainz, Milan, Oudenaarde, Nuremberg, Reutlingen, and Speyer.

²⁹ See R. N. Swanson, 'Caxton's Indulgence for Rhodes, 1480-81,' *The Library*, seventh series, 5 (2004), 195-201.

Turcopolier, acting on behalf of the Pope, Sixtus IV.³⁰ Kendale was a senior Hospitaller dispatched from Rhodes to raise support for the Hospitallers and he sought to achieve this via diplomacy, to gain allies, and by indulgences, to gain money.

Attending closely to Kendale offers a microcosm of how long-distance information – or news – could travel in the later Middle Ages; indeed, it becomes clear that news of the siege travelled in a way that was fundamentally connected to the promulgation of these indulgences. On 29th-30th April 1480 Kendale had an audience with Edward IV at Westminster and informed him and the English court of the Turkish preparations to ‘subdue the island of Rhodes’. Edward IV, an emphatic international supporter of Rhodes, responded by granting protection to Pierre d’Aubusson, the Hospitaller Grand Master, and the whole convent at Rhodes, its men and its possessions. Moreover the Knights of Rhodes were given

³⁰ Kendale is a fascinating character in his own right, although his precise identity has often been clouded by the fact of there being at least five people of this extremely common name in and around Westminster at precisely the same time. In 1484, one of the John Kendales appeared with William Caxton as auditor of the accounts of St Margaret’s church, Westminster. As Anne Sutton has shown, in 1480, a John Kendale was one of the officers of Edward IV’s chamber, and in 1483 a John Kendale received yeoman status and was present at Richard III’s coronation in that year and became Richard III’s secretary. None of these people can be identified with the Turcopolier John Kendale, responsible for commissioning and authorising Caxton’s indulgence. The St Mary Rounceval indulgence, printed by Caxton in 1480, was partly instigated by John Kendale, valet to the Crown, but this was not the same John Kendale as the Turcopolier who promulgated the indulgences for the Hospitallers. See Anne F. Sutton, ‘Research notes and queries’, *The Ricardian* 4 (1976-8), 436-45; *The Ricardian* 6 (1982-4) 319-23.

permission to display Edward's arms and ensign as a sign of his affection for the order and because of the Knights' roles in confronting 'the most heinous' ('nefandissimi') Turks.³³ Kendale would have then been responsible for promulgating the indulgence in manuscript and for commissioning the printed indulgence from Caxton. This raised money directly for the Hospitallers: pardoners and other agents or sub-collectors, sometimes called 'farmers', 'leased' from Kendale the right to sell the indulgence, probably diocese by diocese; these agents, with their newly-printed pardons then went around the country selling their pardons, like Chaucer's Pardoner, 'Bretful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot' (*Canterbury Tales* I.689), whilst Kendale handed over the donations to his order.

The topicality of these indulgences is often forgotten or neglected. On the one hand, Caxton's printing is often characterised as retrospective, nostalgic, and monumental, but on the other hand Caxton was also producing material which responded directly and urgently to the situation in the Mediterranean.³⁴ In 1480, with the siege of Rhodes, Caxton's output decidedly moved in favour of the printed indulgence, with at least six impressions in 1480 and 1481 alone (as given above in note 25). Caxton's role in producing these indulgences, which are also records of nationalist sentiment, Christian defence, and anti-Islamic violence, chimes with what Jennifer R. Goodman has described as Caxton's broader valorisation of

³³ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward IV, Edward V, Richard III, A.D. 1476-1485*, ed. K. H. Ledward (London: H. M. S. O., 1901), pp. 193-4.

³⁴ Almost all Caxton's printing in the period 1476-1482 was concerned with English literature (Chaucer and Lydgate), instructional and moral texts (e.g. Cato's *Distiches*, Christine de Pizan's *Moral Proverbs*) and attempts to sell printed books of hours and ordinals.

‘the ideal of crusade’ and his ongoing definition and redefinition in his publications of the Christian universe and its border with the Moorish, Arab, and Turkish worlds.³⁵

These were timely indulgences but they were time-limited indulgences: they often included both the calendar and papal regnal year, which bound their validity, and in the case of a topical event like the Siege of Rhodes in 1480, unsold indulgences went out of date within months, if not weeks, if the political situation changed. Furthermore, the Pope cancelled earlier indulgences and issued ‘extensions’, in order to raise more money, which meant that customers could find themselves buying an indulgence which had, technically, gone out of date. This time-limited aspect of the printed indulgence foregrounds its speed, its status as a current document, and helps account for the fact that we encounter many surviving examples of such indulgences without the names filled in – the indulgence had gone out of date or its topicality had passed.³⁶ This also helps explain why so many pieces of printed

³⁵ See Jennifer R. Goodman, ‘Caxton’s Continent’, in ed. William Kuskin, *Caxton’s Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 101-123. These include his editions of the historical *Godefroy of Boloyne* (about a crusader hero), *Paris and Vienne* (which includes a proposed crusade), Mandeville’s *Travels*, (with its opening encomium to crusading) and *The Four Sonnes of Aymon*, with its account of the illegitimate seizure of Jerusalem.

³⁶ Although it is worth noting too that Robert Swanson suggests an out-of-date 1480 indulgence being bought in 1481 – that is, even when an indulgence has passed its date it seems sometimes to have been considered legitimate by its purchasers. Swanson, ‘Caxton’s Indulgence’, p. 196.

indulgences appear in binding fragments – they had simply gone out of date and were then useful only as waste paper or vellum.³⁷

2. ‘dylectable newesse’

In his epilogue to the crusader romance *Godefroy of Boloyne* (also printed in 1481 and thus within about a year of the Siege of Rhodes) Caxton introduced contemporary events, as if subconsciously. *Godefroy of Boloyne* deals with the First Crusade and the eponymous hero’s capture of Jerusalem at the end of the eleventh century. Yet in his epilogue Caxton updates this idea of holy war, urging ‘Christian people’ to be ‘unyed’ – united – in peace and to undertake a ‘pilgrimage with stronge honde’ to expel the ‘saracens and turks’ from the Holy Land.⁴⁰ The anachronistic addition of Turks – who were not in the Holy Land in the First Crusade – speaks to the specific moment in the aftermath of the Siege of Rhodes, and the desire for a pan-Christian polity and a united martial effort against all Muslims. The long shadow of the crusades combines here with an awareness of the more urgent presence of the Turk in the English mind.

Proximal to Caxton, John Lettou, a printer in nearby London, was also thinking about the Turks in 1480 and 1481. Alongside producing indulgences for the Hospitallers, Lettou and his business partner William Machlinia were also probably busy at this time producing an important literary testament to the Siege of Rhodes. About a year to 18 months after the Hospitallers successfully repelled the Turks from Rhodes, they published the sole surviving

³⁷ See Swanson, ‘Caxton’s Indulgence,’ p. 198.

⁴⁰ William Caxton, *Prologues and Epilogues*, ed. W. J. B. Crotch, Early English Text Society OS 176 (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 48.

edition of John Kay's Middle English *Siege of Rhodes* (usually dated to 1482 or 1482/3).⁴¹

The English edition of Kay's *Siege of Rhodes* survives in 4 printed copies as well as two manuscript fragments, apparently copied from the printed edition.⁴²

Kay's *Siege of Rhodes* is an augmented and adapted translation of a Latin account of the siege written by Guillaume Caoursin (1430-1501), the Hospitaller vice-chancellor in Rhodes. Caoursin was an eye-witness to, and participant in, the 1480 siege, and Caoursin's was an 'official' propagandistic account of the Hospitallers' victory; it was very widely-read

⁴¹ Kay refers to the death of Mehmet II ('the grete Turke late named Mahumete', 'this grete Turke in his moste pryde & his moste hope hath made be sodeyn deth amende of his lyve'); Mehmet died in May 1481, so Kay must have still been writing the after this, and before the death in April 1483 of Edward IV. Whilst Lettou and Machlinia's role in printing the *Siege* is not certain, they are the most likely agents behind the production of the edition, although further research on the text's print history may modulate this view.

⁴² London, British Library IB.55432; IB.55433; Manchester, John Rylands University Library 3494; and Yale University, Paul Mellon Center for British Art (the 'Lothian copy'). The manuscript fragments are London, British Library, Cotton MSS Vitellius D.xii (f. 43v) and Titus A.xxvi (f. 160v). Theresa M. Vann has suggested that there was also a 1490 Caxton edition of the text, but no such edition is listed in ISTC or similar bibliographies; the 1490 edition seems to be based on an error in Edward Gibbon's *The Crusades* (1870). See Theresa M. Vann, 'John Kaye, the 'Dread Turk', and the Siege of Rhodes', in ed. Victor Mallia-Milanes, *The Military Orders, Volume 3: History and Heritage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 245-52.

and rapidly printed across Europe.⁴³ One of the most substantial changes Kay made to Caoursin's text was an added introduction. In this four-page introduction Kay ('Johan Kay') introduces himself.⁴⁴ He identifies himself as 'humble poete lawreate and moste lowly servant' to 'the moste excellente, moste redoubted and moste crysten kyng, Kyng Edward the Fourth', and through these opening lines the text is given a sense, through its conventions of servitude, of a royal imprimatur. What the term 'poete lawreate' meant at this point remains open to debate, but it is evident that humanist scholars who had achieved significant proficiency in academic rhetoric underwent a crowning ceremony with a laurel and took this title: Alessandra Petrina has called our attention to several such men, at precisely Kay's moment and based in England, who were known by this term, including Stefano di Surigone

⁴³ Caoursin's text was printed at least 10 times between 1480 and 1483. These are Venice (1480; ISTC ic00108000; ic00112500), Parma (1480; ISTC ic00109000), Bruges (1480-84; ISTC ic00109300), Louvain (1480-83; ISTC ic00109350), Passau (1480; ISTC ic00109400; ic00111500), Zaragoza (1481; ISTC ic00109500), Rome (1481-3; ISTC ic00110000), Odense (1482; ISTC ic00110500). A full critical edition of Caoursin's text is in eds. Jean-Bernard de Vaivre and Laurent Vissière, *Tous les Deables d'Enfer': Relations du Siège de Rhodes par les Ottomans en 1480* (Geneva: Droz, 2014), pp. 348–488.

⁴⁴ References to Kay's *Siege of Rhodes* are taken here from the edition in Anthony Bale and Sebastian Sobceki, *Medieval English Travel* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 415-445. A full critical edition of Kay's text does not yet exist, although I plan to bring such a text to publication in the next few years. For English translations and transcriptions of documents concerning the 1480 Siege, including a transcription of Kay's text, see Theresa M. Vann and Donald J. Kagay, *Hospitaller Piety and Crusader Propoaganda: Guillaume Caoursin's Description of the Ottoman Siege of Rhodes, 1480* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015).

of Milan in 1478 and Pietro Carmeliano of Brescia in 1483. Both Surigone and Carmeliano were Italian humanists and scholars; their use of the term ‘poet laureate’ did not imply a royal position, although that is how Kay frames it.⁴⁵ Surigone wrote an epitaph for Chaucer at Westminster Abbey and was certainly known to Caxton. Carmeliano was attached to Oxford and apparently to Westminster Abbey and involved in producing texts with Caxton in 1483-4. Carmeliano prepared the *Sex quam elegantissimae epistolae* for Caxton’s press, a series of

⁴⁵ On Surigone, Carmeliano, and Lorenzo Traversagni (apparently involved with Caxton in the printing of the *Nova Rhetorica* (1479) and its *Epitome* (1480)), see N. F. Blake, *Caxton and his World* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), pp. 195-9. The ‘royal’ post of laureate, as now understood, was not instituted until 1668 and Charles II’s patent of appointment to John Dryden as ‘Poet Laureate’. According to the Petrarchan ideal of laureateship, a laureate is an exemplary rhetorician who speaks on behalf of his ruler and nation. The output of the laureate was often nationalistic but the laureate himself was not necessarily a national appointment. Other corroboration of Edward IV’s patronage of Kay has not yet been forthcoming, but by the seventeenth-century, in the account of the historian John Selden (1584-1654), Kay had entered the genealogy of poet laureates of England, along with John Gower (laureate to Richard II), John Skelton (laureate to Henry VIII), and the Tudor grammarian Robert Whittington: ‘John Skelton had that title of Laureat under Henry the VIII. And in the same time Robert Whittington called himself *Grammatica magister & Protovates Anglia, inflorentissima Oxoniensi Academia Laureatus*. Under Edward the fourth, one John Kay by the title of his *humble Poet Lawreat*, dedicates to him the siege of Rhodes in prose. But John Gower, a famous Poet under Richard the II buried in S. Mary Overies Church, hath his Statue Crowned with Ivy mixt with Roses.’ John Selden, *Titles of Honor* (London: R. Whitaker, 1631), p. 412.

Latin letters between Pope Sixtus IV and the Venetian Doge concerning the Wars of Ferrara (1482-4);⁴⁶ Carmeliano was then described as ‘poetam laureatum in Westmonasterio’, suggesting that the role of laureate might have been held at the abbey rather than, or alongside, the court.⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that this volume, whilst usually understood as a guide to epistolary rhetoric, was also highly contemporary in its coverage of recent international events.

Damian Leader has advanced a compelling argument that John Kay should be identified with Caius Auberinus (d. 1504), Orator and rhetorician at Cambridge 1483-1503 and the first man appointed to a university professorship in England. If we accept Leader’s identification of Kay with Auberinus, and I believe we should, ‘poete lawreate’ could have been an academic term.⁴⁸ This bridges the university’s role with royal service and is consonant with Auberinus’ role as letter-writer to dignitaries, including the court, on behalf of the university Congregation.⁴⁹ We know that Auberinus was later well-connected with the court at Westminster, just as Kay’s preface to his *Siege of Rhodes* advertises his proximity to Edward IV. Kay’s form of naming Edward IV in his preface as ‘moste crysten kyng’ suggests

⁴⁶ ISTC is00558550.

⁴⁷ David Carlson, ‘The Occasional Poetry of Pietro Carmeliano’, *Aevum* 61 (1987), 495-502; Blake, *Caxton and His World*, pp. 196-8; Rosser, *Medieval Westminster*, pp. 214-15.

⁴⁸ Damian Riehl Leader, ‘Caius Auberinus: Cambridge’s first professor’ in eds. Jacqueline Brown and William P. Stoneman, *A Distinct Voice: Studies for Leonard E. Boyle* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 322-7. I find Leader’s case suggestive and largely convincing but it is not conclusive, and further work on Auberinus/Caius/Kay may well shed further light on the intriguing connections made by Leader.

⁴⁹ Leader, ‘Caius Auberinus’, pp. 322-3.

Edward's role as *rex Christianissimus*, a formula used by English and French kings often in moments when they were doing something to Jews or Muslims, positioning the national king as leader of all Christendom. Edward IV does seem to have taken an especial interest in the situation in Rhodes and sent a ship, the *Margaret Howard*, to help to defend the island in 1480.⁵⁰

Kay's introduction proceeds to give a brief account of the Turkish conquests of the last forty years: the 'oppressyng & captyvyte' of Constantinople in 1453 and the 'infortunate losse of the streng cytee of Nygrepoint' (the capture of the Venetian protectorate of Euboea/Negroponte in 1470). Kay describes Rhodes as 'the key and yate of all crystendome' and, from Kay's perspective, writing in 1481 or 1482, the cataclysmic losses of Constantinople and Negroponte inexorably led up to the Siege of Rhodes. That is to say, Kay wished to present the 1480 Siege as the culmination and full extent of Ottoman encroachment and regarded the Hospitaller victory as a decisive one. As Theresa Vann has argued, Kay used his preface to introduce the idea that Mehmet besieged Rhodes 'to persecute and undermine the Christian faith, not to extend his sovereignty', suggesting Kay's understanding of the conflict with the Turks as a Christian-Islamic conflict, rather than, or as well as, an imperial conflict.⁵¹

Kay mentions in his introduction that he 'has seen & red in Italye' about the Turks' oppression. Whilst we currently know very little about Kay's biography, it is my suspicion that he had spent time at the court of the humanist, bibliophile, and *condottiere* Federico [Federigo] da Montefeltro (1422-82) at Urbino, the major meeting-place of Italian humanism

⁵⁰ Harris, *Greek Emigres*, p. 66.

⁵¹ Vann, 'John Kaye', p. 249.

and Byzantine culture.⁵² Montefeltro's court and library became a treasure-house of written reports of current affairs, monuments of Greek and Hebrew writing, and salvaged codices from the eastern Mediterranean, assembled in a dazzling library of nearly 900 volumes.⁵³ Indeed, Kay's introduction explicitly mentions Montefeltro, 'the lord of Urbyn' [Urbino], as the recipient of an Italian-language account of the oppression of Negroponte, whilst the Byzantine cardinal Bessarion visited Montefeltro's court and deposited Greek manuscripts there. Edward IV, to whom Kay had described himself as 'poete lawreate', had made Montefeltro Knight of the Garter in 1474, demonstrating plausible and sustained connections between Westminster and Urbino.⁵⁴

⁵² See L. Michelini Tocci, 'La formazione della biblioteca di Federico da Montefeltro. Codici contemporanei e libri a stampa,' in *Federico di Montefeltro: Lo stato, le arti, la cultura*, in eds. G. Cerboni Baiardi, G. Chittolini, P. Floriáni, (Rome: Bulzoni, 1986), 3:9-18; M. Peruzzi, 'The Library of Glorious Memory: History of the Montefeltro Collection,' in *Federico da Montefeltro and His Library*, ed. M. Simonetta (New York: Y Press, 2007), 32-3; Ingrid Alexander-Skipnes, "'Bound with Wond'rous Beauty": Eastern Codices in the Library of Federico Da Montefeltro', *Mediterranean Studies*, 19 (2010), 67-85.

⁵³ As the next stage of this research, I intend to conduct further research on the likelihood of Kay's acquaintance with Montefeltro and his important court.

⁵⁴ See further C. Clough, 'The Relations Between the English and Urbino Courts, 1474-1508', *Studies in the Renaissance* (1967) 14, 202-218. A further intriguing connection is the fact that John Sant, Abbot of Abingdon, had visited Montefeltro in 1474 in order to deliver his Garter robes (Clough, 'The Relations', p. 204). Sant was papal commissary for the 1476 Caxton indulgence. Montefeltro did not visit England to be proclaimed as Knight of the Garter, but rather Sant performed the ceremony at Grottaferrata, and Montefeltro sent a proxy

Kay's introduction is a positive advertisement for the Rhodians' successful resistance to the Siege and a celebration of the sudden death of Mehmet II which occurred shortly after (in May 1481). Kay frames his text as something that will bring to the king's subjects 'the dylectable newesse and tithynges of the gloryous victorye of the Rhodyans agaynest the Turkes' so that they can see and celebrate the great power of Christendom against Islam. Kay's phrasing, 'dylectable newesse and tithynges', therefore presents his translation as news media, an up-to-date report. 'News' is not, in the modern sense, usually thought of as a medieval concept, and the term 'news' was rarely used in Middle English. In fact Kay's is one of the first such uses.⁵⁵ More importantly, Kay's *Siege of Rhodes* marks the emergence of contemporaneity (to use Brendan Dooley's phrase) both as a new function of prose writing, and as a function of contemporaneous media, sitting alongside the indulgences we have

to England for the investiture in 1475. In the following years there were 'close and cordial' relations between the two Courts (Clough, 'The Relations', p. 205) and Montefeltro and Edward exchanged letters, at precisely that moment – 1475-82 – when Kay must have been in Italy and seen the texts he mentions in his Introduction. Vann, 'John Kaye', pp. 246-8, shows how Kay must also have seen Pierre d'Aubusson's official letters to Pope Sixtus IV and Emperor Frederick III. These letters were printed as a broadside in Mainz, Cologne, Nuremberg and Strasburg in 1480 (ISTC ia01180700; ia01180900; ia01180800; ia01181000).

⁵⁵ *MED*, 'neue' 1(g)pl, cites James I of Scotland's *Kingis Quair* (c. 1437) in a copy of c. 1500 as the first usage of the plural 'neues' for 'tidings, news', although the *Oxford English Dictionary* has two earlier instances, from 1417 and 1489; in both cases the word 'news' is used in a royal correspondence to refer to affairs of state.

already seen:⁵⁶ this was literacy in the service of new news. As in the indulgences which responded directly to the changing situation in the East, in Kay's account we can see here the early manipulation of media as a highly propagandistic activity determinedly circulated by the Hospitallers in an information war: that is, the use of print for the dissemination of good news.

Similarly, in 1481 an early 'newsletter' was produced in Bruges, in French, and bound in Westminster for Edward IV's heir, Edward of York, Edward V (b. 1470, d. c. 1483). The book was then owned by Edward IV's daughters Elizabeth (1466-1503) and Cecily (1469-1507) of York. This little-studied book, which has the title *Testament de Amyra Sulthan Nichhemedy* (The Testament of Sultan Mehmet II), described the power-vacuum and court strife in Constantinople after Mehmet's death in 1481. The *Testament* (now Princeton University Library Garrett MS 168) can be connected to Caxton via its binder who was certainly working in Westminster with Caxton.⁵⁷ It was translated into French from an Italian-Venetian letter sent from Constantinople on September 12, 1481. In the present context, the point about the *Testament* is that it reflects the highly *current* interest in Rhodes as mediated through literary translation in the aftermath of the siege.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Brendan Dooley ed., *The Dissemination of News and the Emergence of Contemporaneity in Early Modern Europe* (London: Ashgate, 2010).

⁵⁷ See Don Skemer, *Medieval & Renaissance manuscripts in the Princeton University Library*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1:383-5; see too C. A. J. Armstrong, 'A Present for a Prince: The Survival of a Newsletter', *The Times* (London), May 23 1936, pp. 15-16, who identifies the binder as Johannes [Guilebert] Meese.

⁵⁸ This 'newsletter' is a rare example in England of an increasingly common phenomenon in Venice at the time, of the manuscript news digest detailing diplomatic and military news. See

‘News’ of the Siege – in the sense of news reporting – chimes with the medieval understanding of novelty as memorable and instructive. The other word used by Kay, ‘tithynges’ (tidings), usually referred to an official report or a message brought by a messenger. In Kay’s formulation, ‘newesse and tithynges’ are somewhat different from other available terms like ‘intelligence’ (knowledge of a fact that has occurred) or ‘historie’ (a systematic account of events past).⁵⁹ From the mid-fifteenth century, the terms ‘novel’ and ‘novelté’ – the forerunners both of ‘news’ and the prose novel – came to be used to speak more directly to reports of strange matters and unprecedented events, the writing of something different from that previously existing, known, or used.

Recent work in media theory, exploring current digital journalism and the circulation of news, highlights the blurred boundaries between professional news production, the public circulation and consumption of news, and the diversity of ‘actors’ (writers, translators, printers, and consumers) involved in these processes, and such insights might usefully inform how we start to approach ‘news’ in the past.⁶⁰ The historian Margaret Meserve has described

further Isabella Lazzarini, *Communication and Conflict: Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350–1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Filippo de Vivo, ‘Archival Intelligence: Diplomatic Correspondence, Information Overload, and Information Management in Italy, 1450–1650’, in ed. Liesbeth Corens, Kate Peters and Alexandra Walsham, *Archives and Information in the Early Modern World*, Proceedings of the British Academy 202 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 53-86.

⁵⁹ Here using the definitions offered by *MED*, s.v. ‘intelligence’ 2(b); ‘histori(e)’ 1(b).

⁶⁰ I am here adapting the terminology of David Domingo, Pere Masip & Irene Costera Meijer, ‘Tracing Digital News Networks’, *Digital Journalism*, 3 (2015), 53-67. The main theoretical approach in contemporary media theory is Actor Network Theory (ANT), which

how the Ottoman attack and conquest of the Venetian island of Negroponte (Euboea) in 1470 was a watershed in the way in which ‘news and popular opinion...circulated via the press’.⁶¹ Meserve’s work focusses on Venetian media, and she reads reports of the conquest of Negroponte as a key moment of transition in how reading about political information became a part of the public sphere (following the theories of Jürgen Habermas). Meserve’s study is illuminating, and is usefully supplemented by Rosa Salzberg’s study of news and ephemera in Venice at this time.⁶² Salzberg shows how cheap print interacted with ‘manuscript and oral

highlights the interrelation between human actors, technological actants, social activities, and diverse audiences: that is, in contemporary media theory, to think [who/what is the subject of “to think” here] holistically about the sociotechnical production of news. This can emphasise the dynamic processes involved in how news writing is formulated and circulated in contexts that are rapidly changing. This in turn provides those interested in medieval news with a way of moving away from a grand narrative of ‘the printing press as an agent of change’, or anachronistic arguments about the pre-history of the newspaper, and instead thinking about the various pressures, some of them micro-historical, that led to the production of news. See the helpful discussion of definitions and approaches in Seth C. Lewis & Oscar Westlund, ‘Actors, Actants, Audiences, and Activities in Cross-Media News Work’, *Digital Journalism* 3:1 (2015), 19-37.

⁶¹ Margaret Meserve, ‘News from Negroponte: Politics, Popular Opinion, and Information Exchange in the First Decade of the Italian Press’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 59 (2006), 440–80.

⁶² Rosa Salzberg, *Ephemeral City: Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); see too S. J. Noakes. ‘The Development of the Book Market in Late Quattrocento Italy’, *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 11 (1981), 23-55.

modes of communication’, carrying a mixture of ‘ordinary and extraordinary information’.⁶³ In the case of Venice, much of this printed news fed an appetite to know about the perilous situation of Venice’s Mediterranean colonies, and the range of printed material, from vernacular pamphlets and broadsides to Latin treatises like Caoursin’s (first printed at Venice, by Erhard Ratdolt, in 1480), suggested a number of kinds of audience for this topic. Much of the news reported in Venice was at first performed orally and was closely related to existing technologies of public lamentation and versifying; indeed the Venetian news-poem, *La persa de Nigroponte* (*The Loss of Negroponte*, printed in Milan, 1471), was sung in public performances to familiar tunes, as current news was mediated through established oral cultural forms.⁶⁴ Meserve and Salzberg’s analyses can be extended and contrasted to the English sources available, and the distinctive textual histories of vernacular prose ‘news’ narratives like Kay’s *Siege of Rhodes*.

Texts about ‘news’ were by their nature ‘untested’ on the market, although printers must have had a sense of their markets’ desire for topical reporting. At the same time, these original and emerging texts were framed into established ‘medieval’ narrative models through which the news was reconciled with authoritative cultural forms, forms which would have been recognisable and attractive to readers. Kay’s text is in many ways retrospective and formulaic, and so paradoxically retreats from contemporaneity even as it engages it. First and foremost is its status as siege literature, a common mode of medieval narrative. Poetic accounts of the sieges of Troy, Jerusalem, Milan, and various crusader sieges all

⁶³ Salzberg, *Ephemeral City*, p. 64.

⁶⁴ Salzberg, *Ephemeral City*, pp. 5, 105, 122. See too Filippo de Vivo, ‘Microhistories of long-distance information: space, movement, and agency in the early modern news’, *Past & Present* 242, supp. 14 (2019), 179-214.

animate the vernacular literature of medieval England.⁶⁵ As Lee Manion has described, the siege of a city ‘provides a way to represent larger aspects of historical change emblematically...signifying the need to maintain the purity of the body, the realm, or the faith against outside threats while also highlighting resilience through walls and other fortifications.’⁶⁶ Manion usefully highlights the intersection in siege literature between historical and geographical specificity and literary symbolism. Marco Nievergelt has described how fourteenth-century siege literature used crusading fantasies about historical sieges to restore or imagine a unified Christendom eroded by the papal schism, in a parallel way that anticipates Kay’s approach to the Turks.⁶⁷ A siege offers writers and readers the opportunity to focus on microcosmic moments of tension and crisis. The siege suspends time in a pivotal incident, a narrative hinge which on which depends the success or failure of the siege. Larger narratives of historical change and conflict – such as the conflict between Christendom and its others – can become concentrated in siege literature, underscoring human agency, moments of pathos, and the relationship between specific places and broader historical changes, all of which are exploited by Kay.

⁶⁵ See Malcolm Hebron, *The Medieval Siege: Theme and Image in Middle English Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), esp. pp. 76-84 on Rhodes.

⁶⁶ Lee Manion, ‘Renaissance Crusading Literature: Memory, Translation and Adaptation’, in ed. Anthony Bale, *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 232-247.

⁶⁷ Marco Nievergelt, ‘The *Sege of Melayne* and the *Siege of Jerusalem*: National Identity, Beleaguered Christendom, and Holy War during the Great Papal Schism’, *Chaucer Review*, 49 (2015), 402-26.

Kay's account of the siege follows Caoursin's source in relying on miracles, although this is an aspect of the siege that Kay intensifies and elaborates. The narrative is propelled by miraculous airborne visions of a golden cross, a beautiful maiden with a shield and spear, and an old man in peasant apparel – that is, visions of Jesus, Mary, and John the Baptist – as recent history is almost instantly turned into divinely-ordained providential time.⁶⁸ These generic miracle accounts resonate with pan-European *exempla* and connect recent news with familiar, established devotional culture. Kay's text asks the reader 'Who was cause of the deth of so many [Turks] in the space of two owres in the grete & last assaute, but god & his angels that were seen in the bright eyer?'⁶⁹ The text retreats from historical singularity into devotional exemplarity, asserting that 'Well may every man knowe that [the preservation of Rhodes] was more Goddes acte then mannys'.⁷⁰ Such news should not therefore be thought of as a 'secular' form or as reports strictly of observed facts, but rather a literary form which shapes recent events into culturally-authoritative narrative forms. This shows the Hospitallers' divine protection. At the same time, as Malcom Hebron has suggested, Kay augmented Caoursin's text in such a way as to entertain and astonish an audience hungry for accounts of crusading chivalry and religious miracles.⁷¹

'News' is not the same as its cousins, the marvellous and prodigious, although they are also modes of making something memorable and instructive through surprise. 'News', as Patricia Ingham's luminous study of medieval novelty has shown, was a deeply ambivalent

⁶⁸ Bale and Sobecki, *Medieval English Travel*, pp. 441-2.

⁶⁹ Bale and Sobecki, *Medieval English Travel*, p. 443.

⁷⁰ Bale and Sobecki, *Medieval English Travel*, p. 443.

⁷¹ Hebron, *The Medieval Siege*, pp. 77-84.

mode in medieval culture.⁷² On the one hand, novelty stood for invention and remarkable technology but, on the other hand, it also connoted newfangledness, contrivance, and the unfortunate turning of Fortune's wheel. Medieval 'news' might encompass storied Mandevillean prose accounts of prodigies in the East as well as up-to-date reports, like Kay's, of the vicissitudes of international politics. Yet these two narrative forms are not as far apart as they first appear, with earlier imaginative geographies and theologies informing accounts of 'current' affairs. My approach to the *Siege of Rhodes* corroborates the entanglement of 'new' and old news as charted by Ingham, who demonstrates the ethical and temporal ambivalence towards the 'new' in medieval culture. *The Siege of Rhodes* as a media event is poised between new incidents and old narratives, at once corroborating ancient stories of the East that had circulated since the Crusades and detailing shocking, stirring, novel events, reconciling novelty with authority and tradition.

Kay's text is also noteworthy for its ambitions towards unifying Christians, describing the Greek holy sites of Rhodes in reverential terms and eschewing the usual schismatic anti-Greek sentiment that we find in much Latin Christian travel writing about the eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, the text even asserts that there was 'a comyn acorde among the Grekes & Latynes and al the people of Rhodes whiche wold rather dye for Crystes fayth thenne to be of amyte and of the lawe of Mahumete'.⁷³ The entire non-Muslim population of Rhodes (including its Jews, who in Kay's account play a part in the defence of Rhodes) are presented by Kay as a unified polity, the 'strong manly and Crysten people of Rhodes.' At the same time, whilst the design and purpose of Kay's *Siege of Rhodes* is a propagandistic

⁷² Patricia Clare Ingham, *The Medieval News: Ambivalence in an Age of Innovation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁷³ Bale and Sobecski, *Medieval English Travel*, p. 437.

celebration of the Hospitallers' successful repulse of the siege, the text is riven with a kind of anxiety about treachery and conversion.

In particular, Kay's text inaugurates in Middle English the new figure of the Greco-Turkish renegade (from the medieval Latin *renegatus*, 'renounced'). Kay's usage ('renegaes') was not the first in Middle English; indeed Chaucer used the term several times to connote conversion from Christianity, and Mandeville used it to describe the emperor Julian the Apostate. Kay's renegade announces the new figure, a Byzantine Christian converted to Islam, who was fast becoming a stock figure of travel writing, as western pilgrims observed dizzying changes in identity and affiliation. At the same time, Kay and his source Caoursin dwell on apostasy and focus on the exemplary stories of three men, Anthony Meligalo, Demetrius Sophiano, and Master George, all of whom are renegades and whose stories are foregrounded and extended in this account of the Siege. Anthonius Meligalo/Anthony Melagolo is described as 'a man unkynd to God & to man... noble of byrth & evyll of condycyons & lyvyng.'⁷⁴ He is a fallen individual who reflects the corrupt whole of Christendom, who used 'hys fals & subtyl witte' in order to 'putte in destruction his owen contrey.' He was paid by the Turks to spy 'dyllygentely and pryvely' on the city of Rhodes. He surveyed 'al the places defensybles & indefensybles' and then 'pourtrayed & peynted them in a papire & bore the sayd pourtraytoure & papir to the cytee of Constantynople', in order to assist the Turks in preparing their attack.⁷⁵

The second renegade, Demetrius Sophiano, is a similar character to Meligalo. Sophiano is said to have been from Negroponte and had 'renayed & forsouke the fayth of

⁷⁴ Bale and Sobecki, *Medieval English Travel*, p. 419.

⁷⁵ Bale and Sobecki, *Medieval English Travel*, p. 419.

Chryste & wente to the Turk' after the fall of the territory to the Ottomans in 1470.⁷⁶ He had previously been the ambassador of the Turks to the Rhodians, travelling between the two 'under a faynte and colour' of suing for peace.⁷⁷ He used this time to gather intelligence on Rhodes, and to confirm Anthony Meligalo's accounts, and this led the Turks falsely to believe in certain weaknesses in Rhodes' defences.

The third renegade, George, 'a renegade man of subtyl witte', lived in Constantinople and received large sums from the Turks for his 'subtil witte & grete connyng' in making weaponry. He was charged by the Turks with having a 'table' – a wax tablet or a notebook – made depicting the city of Rhodes, and it was this table that led the Turks to decide to attack the island.⁷⁸

These renegades bear out the accounts we find in travel writing of the eastern Mediterranean, according to which western Europeans became increasingly concerned and confused about who was whom in such a fluid, multi-confessional setting. The emphasis on the figure of the renegade is a consequence of similarity, not difference. The renegade is confusingly alike, he is able to change identity to move between worlds: the renegade, like the Turk, had become beguilingly proximate. Not only do these three men disclose an acute perception of treachery from within, but, especially in the case of Meligalo and George, corroborate the place of Rhodes at the centre of an 'information war' of written information and plans circulating between territories. Caoursin as author and Kay as translator, as well as the printers of their texts, were similarly using creative media technologies to communicate

⁷⁶ Bale and Sobecki, *Medieval English Travel*, p. 420.

⁷⁷ Bale and Sobecki, *Medieval English Travel*, p. 420.

⁷⁸ Bale and Sobecki, *Medieval English Travel*, p. 421.

and advance a form of information which would co-opt arts of writing and reading in the service of anti-Turkish sentiment.

4. The Turkish man

There are dozens of similar English vernacular productions from the period 1453-1522 that engage with Turkey and the Hospitallers, and there are many such accounts that have been largely overlooked and little studied. I close with two especially interesting vernacular English texts that treat the physical form of the Turkish man in the context of the Ottoman conquests: the first a letter from the Paston collection, and the second the late fifteenth-century poem, *The Turk and Sir Gawain*.

In February/March 1470, John Paston wrote about a new presence in his London household, saying:

ther is comen a newe litell Torke, whyche is a wele vysagyd felawe, off the age off xl. yere; and he is lower than Manuell by a hanffull, and lower then my lytell Tom by the scholderys, and mor lytell above hys pappe [*breast*]; and he hathe, as he seyde to the Kynge hymselffe, iij. or iiij. sonys, chylde, iche one off hem as hyghe and asse lykly as the Kynge hymselffe; and he is leggyd ryght i-now, and it is reportyd that hys pyntell [*penis*] is as long as hys legge.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ *Paston Letters & Papers*, ed. Norman Davis, 3 vols., Early English Text Society supplementary series 20-22, rev. ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004-5), 1.415.

Intriguingly, the Turocopolier John Kendale knew the Paston family; as Prior of the Hospitallers at St John's Clerkenwell he wrote to John Paston III in the late 1490s as 'my right entirely well-beloved cousin and frende Sir John Paston' (*Paston Letters & Papers*, ed. Davis, 2.480).

‘Manuell’ and ‘Tom’ were evidently other members of Paston’s household, perhaps employed amongst the many servants the family had (such as Robin and Rogier); the name of ‘Manuell’ may suggest he was Spanish or Portuguese. Paston’s letter brings together his admiration for the Turk’s physical form – his good face, his decent legs, his long penis - with an exoticised superciliousness. Whilst there are many servants and employees described in the Paston correspondence, and many letters describing aspects of physical appearance, it is the only time in the collection that a penis is described. My preliminary searches have found few other examples of Turkish entertainers or attendants in fifteenth-century England;⁸⁰ the ‘little Turk’ was possibly a soldier who had been taken captive, or an enslaved person who had made his way to England via Venice or Genoa, and may be identical to the Constantinopolitan servant in Edward IV’s court in the period 1467-8.⁸¹ The only other

⁸⁰ See John Block Friedman, ‘The Art of the Exotic: Robinet Testard’s Turbans and Turban-Like Coiffure’, in eds. Robin Netherton and Gale Owen-Crocker, *Medieval Clothing and Textiles Volume 4* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), 173-191; in Henry VIII’s reign it was a courtly fashion to dress in the Turkish style.

⁸¹ The English *auberge* at Rhodes kept a Turkish slave (see A. T. Luttrell, ‘Slavery at Rhodes, 1306-1440’, in ed. A. Luttrell, *Latin Greece, the Hospitallers, and the Crusades 1291-1440* (London: Variorum, 1982), 81-100, p. 86). Byzantine immigrants did make their way to England (see Harris, *Greek Emigres*, 18-23, 33-8, 90-99, 134-49, 183-7); Harris suggests that Paston’s Turk may be the ‘petit nain de Constantinoble’ (little dwarf of Constantinople) who had served in Edward IV’s court and accompanied Margaret of York at her marriage to the Duke of Burgundy in 1468 (Harris, *Greek Emigres*, p. 37); this might suggest that the Turk was a Byzantine Christian or a Christian convert. For a parallel if not identical case to the Pastons’ Turk see Michael Ray, ‘A Black Slave on the Run in

Greek servant in England around this time I have located so far is ‘Anthony Denys’, servant of John Anteknap (Langbourn Ward, London, 1483).⁸² Paston’s Turk – the size of his penis being the source of talk, or reports, in the Paston household - embodies virility and fecundity (his good-looking, tall sons included) at the same time as he represents a pet-like presence in the Paston household, with all the dominance and affection one brings to a pet. Indeed, unlike many of the Pastons’ dogs and horses, the Turk is not named, other than by his place of origin. The inclusion of the account of the Turk – an account which is somewhat out of place in the Pastons’ business-like correspondence – does not seem to be cruel, but rather filled with a kind of curious wonder: the Turk’s presence and his body are, perhaps, a kind of news. Almost as fascinating as the letter itself is the lack of scholarly attention it has received.

Some attitudes similar to Paston’s might be discerned in the poem *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, a late-fifteenth-century composition that exists in one manuscript, the Percy Folio (London, BL Add. MS 27879).⁸³ This manuscript – written in the mid-seventeenth century

Thirteenth-Century England,’ *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007), 111-19, on an enslaved person, ‘Bartholomew’ the ‘Ethiopian’, possibly a Muslim, brought to England by a Sicilian Christian lord in the thirteenth century. *MED* (s. v. ‘Turk n.’) lists some various people in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with surnames such as ‘Turkman’, ‘Turk’ and even ‘Turheved’ (‘Turk’s-head’).

⁸² Via *England’s Immigrants*, <https://www.englishimmigrants.com/> (accessed 12 January 2023); Anthony’s master, Anteknap, was a Welsh lord, of Flintshire.

⁸³ The poem has been edited in ed. Thomas Hahn, *Eleven Gawain Romances* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), online at <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn->

but collecting medieval material - brings together a range of romance texts with political and current-affairs orientated writing: the *Siege of Rouen* alongside Arthurian material, Breton lais sitting next to poems about the Battle of Flodden in 1513. The combination of the old and mythical with the new, and with topical news, is manifested in *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, a verse romance which effectively updates the fourteenth-century romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the charged setting of Turkish expansion and conquest.

The story of *The Turke and Sir Gawain* is straightforward – an aggressive alien, the Turk, ‘a burne’ (11), a warrior, turns up at Arthur’s court. The description given of him simply says that

He was not hye, but he was broad,

And like a Turke he was made

Both legg and thye (13-15)

In keeping with Paston’s account of the Turk, medieval descriptions of Turks rarely focus on their skin colour but on their stature: not tall but broad, and apparently impressively put-together. The Turk offers to exchange blows with anyone who will, ‘as a brother’, accept his challenge.

The Turk is rudely received by Sir Kay, ‘that crabbed [sullen, sulky] knight’ (19), but spoken to courteously by Gawain, ‘that worthy knight’ (28). It is striking that the Turk divides the two knights, one speaking coarsely, the other politely, and Gawain’s reaction to the Turk suggests Gawain’s acknowledgment of the Turk’s potency and potential brotherhood. As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the outside visitor, the Turk, receives a blow from Gawain. Similarly following the earlier poem, the Turk does not give a blow back

[sir-gawain-turke-and-sir-gawain](#) (accessed 18 January 2023). References to the poem here are given by line number in this edition.

to Gawain but judges Gawain – ‘I shall make thee thrise as feard / As ever was man on middlearth’ (39-41). The buffet Gawain has struck the Turk leads to his exile from the court.

The Turk and Gawain set out on a journey together, with Gawain pledging troth to the Turk. The romance takes on elements both of travel writing and of hagiography here. The two men appear to travel first to the Turk’s own land (the manuscript has various lacunae and the narrative is not always entirely clear); they enter a cleft in the earth (‘The earth opened and closed againe’ (66-7)) into a purgatorial space that resembles those that feature in the lives of saints such as Patrick and Alphege).⁸⁴ The light fades, the weather worsens, there is another lacuna in the manuscript, and the pair make their way to a mysterious, magnificently-provisioned but empty castle. Here, Gawain’s faith seems to be tested, in a scene reminiscent of the trials of Gawain and Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain reveals himself to be greedy (95-7), wanting ‘to eate my fill’ of all the meat there, and the Turk feeds him well with meat, ale and wine. The Turk for a second time refuses to strike Gawain.

Throughout these adventures, the Turk takes the role of guide and teacher to Gawain: the Turk is the senior, a leader, in control. They then travel to the Isle of Man and discover another beautiful castle, this one inhabited by ‘A heathen soldan’ (130) and his court, a ‘hideous rout’ (176) of giants. The Turk and Gawain have by this point become friendly companions, and they are made unwelcome at the Sultan of Man’s court; in an Ottoman-inflected rant, the Sultan inveighs against the Crown of Thorns (157), as propounded by a bishop at Arthur’s court. This appears to be a direct reference to Rhodes and the Hospitallers’ miraculous Thorn relic which bore a rose every Good Friday.

⁸⁴ Hahn notes that this opening and closing cleft is reminiscent of a wide variety of narratives, from Homer and Virgil, but is especially common in Celtic culture, and St Patrick’s Purgatory at Lough Derg might be implied here.

Gawain is told to sit down. Seventeen giants appear, and challenge him to some kind of tennis match with a massive brass ball (an early incidence of sport as a cipher of masculinity). The Turk and Gawain unite against the giants and defeat them, apparently by the Turk stabbing one of them with a stick. But after this incident, a transformation takes place in the relations between the two: the Turk becomes Gawain's 'boy', a word used to describe the Turk six times over just a couple of dozen lines, including explicitly calling him 'Gawanes boy' (219). Unlike *Sir Gawain and Green Knight*, the poem transitions from testing Gawain to test the Turk.

For a third time, the Turk refuses to strike Gawain the promised blow and instead asks Gawain to cut off his head. Gawain agrees and delivers the blow (288) but the Turk then reveals himself to be a Christian 'stalwortht Knight' (290) and sings the *Te Deum*. Suddenly a group of (seventeen) Christian women prisoners appears, who are restored to their husbands, and the poem describes the liberation of captives at some length. The Turk assumes the name Sir Gromer, a name known from other Middle English romances, and is thereby assimilated, domesticated, and converted. In this way the Turk in *The Turk and Sir Gawain* ultimately disappears, or is disappeared. At the end of the poem he is restored to his knightly, Christian identity, and political and masculine order is stabilised. He kneels to Gawain; Gawain is offered the throne of the Isle of Man – literally 'King of Man' (line 322), a noteworthy locution – but instead bestows it on Sir Gromer, the ex-Turk. By resolving around the sovereignty of Man, in a fantasy of the Christian conquest of an island, *The Turk and Sir Gawain* fantasises expansion narrated at precisely the moment Christian islands were falling to the Turks in the east.

This poem has received several excellent critical treatments, and particularly important are those by David Lawton,⁸⁵ Aisling Byrne and Victoria Flood,⁸⁶ and Alan Ambrisco.⁸⁷ Lawton has connected the poem to Sir John Stanley's encounter with the Grand Turk in the *Stanley Poem*, another composition in the Percy Folio, which included a romanticized narrative of Sir John Stanley spending half a year at 'the Turkes pallace'.⁸⁸ Byrne and Flood connect the poem with the Stanley family's status and ambitions in the Isle of Man and their regal authority in the north-west of England and of Man, which had been under their lordship since the early fifteenth century, describing how the poem transposes Mediterranean politics to the Irish Sea. Ambrisco discusses teaching the poem to develop his students' sense of the 'social work' literature can do, in the light of its convoluted sense of imperial ambition and of religious affiliation.

The poem is deeply homosocial and, like the Paston letter, discloses an ambiguous sense of the Turk's masculinity and physical potential, even as the narrative of the poem

⁸⁵ David Lawton, 'History and Legend: The Exile and the Turk,' in eds. Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren, *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval Through Modern* (New York: Palgrave, 2003) 173-94, at pp. 187-189. See too John M. Ganim, 'Oriental Despotism and the Reception of Romance' in ed. Claire McIlroy and Anne M. Scott, *Literature, Emotions, and Pre-Modern War: Conflict in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: ARC, 2021), 167-78.

⁸⁶ Aisling Byrne and Victoria Flood, 'The Romance of the Stanleys', *Viator* 46 (2015), 327-52.

⁸⁷ Alan Ambrisco, 'Teaching *The Turke and Sir Gawain* in the undergraduate British Literature Survey course', *This Rough Magic* 6 (2015), 1-10.

⁸⁸ Lawton, 'History and Legend', p. 191.

tames and normalises it into an Arthurian frame and diminishes the Turk. It also marks what we might identify as an transformation from earlier anti-Islamic, anti-Arab, crusader-era writing – which focussed on the errors of Islam and the ownership of the Holy Land – to a specifically anti-Turkish narrative, which developed after 1453 and significantly deepened and accelerated after 1480. This narrative tended to negotiate similarity rather than difference, including a kind of fearful admiration of the Turk’s physical prowess.⁸⁹ The Turks’ physiognomy and skin colour – two of the touchstones of medieval racialised thinking - were rarely mentioned in medieval English sources; moreover, in many of these sources, the East does not emerge as an undifferentiated body of foreign-ness. This is not to deny the racialisation of the Turk but rather to note the Turk as proximal to Latin Christendom, and to stress the biopolitical contingencies of medieval ideas of racial difference.

5. ‘The good Turkoys...engendreth gladnes’: Hospitallers and Turks in the ‘Global Middle Ages’

The Turk thus emerges in later fifteenth-century England as a shifting object of desire and incorporation; it is perhaps no surprise that the precious stone *turquoise* – which acquired this name around 1400 - was known for protecting anyone who carried it from poverty; as the 1470s *Court of Sapience* says, ‘the good Turkoys engendreth gladnes’.⁹⁰ Turkish gems, Turkish weapons, Turkish hats, and Turkish fruit were all highly prized in fifteenth-century England. Kathleen Kennedy has drawn our attention to the presence of Turkish artefacts in late medieval England, most strikingly how, by 1547, over half the carpets in English royal

⁸⁹ Ambrisco, ‘Teaching *The Turke and Sir Gawain*.’

⁹⁰ *The Court of Sapience*, ed. E. Ruth Harvey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), line 1083.

residences were Turkish.⁹¹ The situation in the eastern Mediterranean was no distant shore for medieval English audiences. We have seen that, in their indulgences, their circulation of news, and their poetry, later fifteenth-century English readers avidly consumed news about the situation between Turks and Christians, and evidently were interested in this eastern front, an eastern front rapidly moving westwards.

We have to recall the importance of the Hospitaller order domestically, which remained a major presence throughout England, and still had twenty preceptories in the second half of the fifteenth century. As Gregory O'Malley has shown, the membership of the order in England was largely fed by noble or gentry families and their cadet branches from the North and the North Midlands. The Hospitallers were significant landowners and their income was buoyed by the sale of indulgences, tithes, burials/undertaking, chantries and similar spiritual payments.⁹² But there was also a frequent traffic between English hospitallers and their base at Rhodes, alongside the vigorous pilgrim traffic which also frequently stopped at Rhodes.⁹³ Speaking at Middleham in Yorkshire in 1484, Richard III

⁹¹ Kathleen E. Kennedy, 'Moors and Moorishness in late medieval England', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 42 (2020), 213-51, citing Donald King, 'The Inventories of the Carpets of King Henry VIII,' *Hali* 5 (1982): 293-302 (at p. 300).

⁹² O'Malley, *The Knights Hospitallers*, pp. 94-100. Such acts were not uncontroversial; for instance, in 1480 the chapter of Passau wrote to Pope Sixtus IV, questioning the Roman church's right to issue such indulgences and protesting that the indulgences for Rhodes were an expansion of papal majesty (Vann and Kagay, *Hospitaller Piety*, p. 37).

⁹³ Edward IV and Henry VII allowed the English order to send men and money to Rhodes, and financed the building of the order's English tower of St Peter at Halicarnassus (now Bodrum). O'Malley, *The Knight's Hospitallers*, pp. 5-6.

expressed his wish that England could be closer to Turkey, so he could ‘drive away not only the Turks but all my foes’, ‘with my own people alone and without the help of other princes.’⁹⁵ Turkey and its hinterland was rapidly becoming the front on which to demonstrate one’s prowess globally.

Thus we cannot see imaginative encounters with Rhodes and the Turks as remote adventures, but rather reflective of a familiar, proximal relationship with which England, as a state, and English people, as a culture, were deeply invested. I am far from the first scholar of medieval English literature to note this: as David Lawton has written, the Turk ‘enacts the role of the enemy but is also potentially a double, mirroring the western Christian.’⁹⁶ And, as Jonathan Harris has shown so fully, in the period after 1453 western Europe, including London, was a relatively frequent destination for Byzantine Greek refugees and migrants; these included a scribe called Demetrius Cantacuzenus working in London in the 1470s and George Branas/Vranas, the Greek bishop of Dromore (Armagh) in the 1490s.⁹⁷ The spectral presence of the Ottoman advances has long been noted in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, performed in East Anglia in the last third of the fifteenth century but set in a Christian-Muslim contact zone in 1461, the year the Byzantine city of Trebizond fell to the Turks. The Croxton *Play* is usually discussed for its performance of antisemitism, but its invocations of Islam and Mohammed, Syria and Turkey, also make clear that a key concern is the

⁹⁵ Nigel Saul, *The Three Richards: Richard I, Richard II, and Richard III* (London: Hambledon, 2006), p. 106

⁹⁶ Lawton, ‘History and legend’, p. 186.

⁹⁷ Harris, *Greek Emigres*, p. 36.

encroachment of Islam.⁹⁸ Nancy Bradley Warren has offered an excellent account of Hospitaller literary productions, many of which were connected to England and Englishmen.⁹⁹ Nicola McDonald has discussed the ‘Test de Turt’, the Turk’s Head, as a fashionable pastry in fifteenth-century English cooking, and this lexicon has been picked up by Alexandra Gillespie in her exploration of the ‘Turk’s-head knot’ in premodern bookbinding.¹⁰¹ Nancy Pope has uncovered a lively genre of fifteenth-century Middle English ‘sultan’s letters’, which functioned as crusade propaganda and military strategy documents.¹⁰² Very recently, Carol Meale has rediscovered, in the Taunton County Archives, a short Middle English poem, ‘The Thorn of Rhodes’, about the Hospitallers’ miraculous thorn; the poem was probably written in 1522 when Rhodes was again under Ottoman siege, a siege it was this time unable to withstand.¹⁰³ This work shows the emerging recognition of

⁹⁸ See further Michael Mark Chemers, ‘Anti-Semitism, Surrogacy, and the Invocation of Mohammed in the “Play of the Sacrament,”’ *Comparative Drama* 41 (2007), 25–55.

⁹⁹ Nancy Bradley Warren, ‘Rhodes’, in ed. David Wallace, *Europe: A Literary History, 1348-1418* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 297-308.

¹⁰¹ Nicola McDonald, ‘Eating People and the Alimentary Logic of *Richard Coeur de Lion*’, in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 124-150; Alexandra Gillespie, ‘Turk’s-Head Knots’, in eds. Deidre Lynch and Alexandra Gillespie, *The Unfinished Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 203-218.s

¹⁰² Nancy Pope, ‘Burgundian crusade propaganda in a Middle English manuscript’, *Viator* (forthcoming, 2023).

¹⁰³ Carol Meale, ‘The Trevelyan Archive: An Introduction to the Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries’, in eds. Corinne Saunders, Richard Lawrie, and Laurie

the place of Turkey in the later medieval English cultural imagination. However, given the cataclysmic news-worthiness of events in Rhodes, and the imaginative, cultural, and political presence of Turks in the late medieval mind, I do not think we, as a community, have yet acknowledged this with the significance it deserves. Geraldine Heng's landmark volume *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* barely mentions the Turks, even though they were one of the main bearers of alterity with which the later medieval west engaged (albeit a group that, as we have seen, were ambiguously racialised as deeply similar and able to merge and able to convert with eastern Christians).¹⁰⁴ Similarly, news historians and print historians have consistently overlooked the Siege of Rhodes as a news event, and instead argued that accounts of the Anglo-Scottish Battle of Flodden, in 1513, herald the birth of news reporting in England, even as Kay, writing 35 years earlier, explicitly framed his account as 'news.'

My interest in Rhodes in this regard is part of the greater project under way in medieval English studies to internationalise and deprovincialize Englishness and medieval English studies, to widen our lens in order better to understand England's encounters with its others, and to chart the premodern aspects of imperial friction, religious violence, and religious stereotyping. This is not to deny Christian Eurocentrism (such a modality is, after all, at the heart of text like Kay's) but rather to interrogate and complicate such Christian

Atkinson, *Middle English Manuscripts and their Legacies: Essays in Honour of Ian A. Doyle* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 118-153.

¹⁰⁴ Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 174; Heng describes how Mamluk was originally the term for 'white slaves' and was applied almost exclusively to Turks.

Eurocentrism and acknowledge its centrality in cultural forms.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, we might say that Christian Eurocentrism is not itself a stable mode, but rather a self-sustaining fiction generated within culture, and ‘the rest of the world’ is a category that requires modulation. Attending properly to the role of the eastern Mediterranean and the specific transformations in Christian Eurocentrism can help to recover an entire world of knowledge, of the Hospitallers’ violent encounter with the East, and the order’s bloody history of gradual and forced decolonisation of the near east. It is also an ambivalent corrective to imperial histories, as we can chart the fragmentation of the Venetian empire, the rise of the Ottoman empire, and the changing notion of ‘European Christendom’ in crisis.

Implicit in the critical move to the ‘Global Middle Ages’ is the privileging of globalisation over nationalism. Such a move runs the risk of flattening difference, as if ‘overseas’ is one mass of undifferentiated difference. Moreover, the ‘Global Middle Ages’ as practiced through subjects like Hospitaller studies tends to focus on official documents, diplomacy, and statecraft, all mediated through dominant and pre-existing academic traditions. A ‘global’ perspective on medieval Rhodes might place the island into a much larger history of Mongol-Turkish expansion or of Christian:Islamic encounter; but looking at the more specific micro-context of Rhodes in and around 1480 allows us to think sensitively about transcultural circulation – especially the role of texts and culture in glossing and re-presenting similarity as difference. The mediated history of the archive of Rhodes is supremely valuable in this regard, as we can identify the role of the Hospitallers – an institution dissolved in England in 1540 – in the active propagandistic production of

¹⁰⁵ Sierra Lomuto, ‘Becoming postmedieval: The stakes of the global middle ages’, *Postmedieval* 11 (2020), 503–512.

knowledge through diverse and innovative media modes and their consumption and circulation by a variety of audiences. The specific history of Rhodes between the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the eventual conquest of Rhodes in 1522 opens a window onto how the west understood its own vulnerability and failures. At the same time, the neglect in medieval studies of the *idea* and reportage of Turkey speaks to the current emphases of what we think ‘the Global Middle Ages’ might look like; the ‘Global Middle Ages’ may well be a reparative act, but it must not be limited to using the past only to look for versions of ourselves.

Rather, this work has started to lead me to a fresh understanding of the importance of the transcultural, that which the historical theorist Madeleine Herren has called ‘a perturbingly interconnected world beyond national histories’.¹⁰⁶ That is, Hospitaller culture, the English mediation of the histories of the Venetian and Ottoman empires, and the advent of contemporaneous news reporting help us to understand engagements with the supra-national, the transnational, and the fantasy of a united Christendom. Such an approach helps us to avoid becoming complicit in ideological fantasies of purified extremes of east: west, Christian: Muslim, self: other. At the same time, the embrace of the idea of the ‘Global Middle Ages’ can be the spur to us to keep looking beyond the confined shores of England, to see how its cultural life was interconnected with the world beyond, in the dynamic production of new texts, new representations, and new news.

¹⁰⁶ Madeleine Herren, ‘Introduction: What is Transcultural History?’, in eds. Madeleine Herren, Martin Rüesch, Christiane Sibille, *Transcultural History: Theories, Methods, Sources* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 1-4 (p. 1).