## SNATCHING DEFEAT FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY FRENCH REACTIONS TO AGINCOURT

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he French expected to win the battle of Agincourt on 25 October 1415. The English had braced themselves for defeat, but the outcome was otherwise. Thousands of Frenchmen were killed or taken prisoner in what can only be described as a murderous and humiliating event for their nation as a whole. As with defeats and disasters of more recent times, questions were bound to be asked. Today, we should expect to find debate and discussion at the highest governmental levels, all properly minuted and filed in readiness for the historian of the future to dissect. The media would seize the story eagerly and conduct its own inquisition, with its intriguing mixture of truth, half-truth, and that essential ingredient, human interest.

The fifteenth century lacks these forums for the discussion of a disaster such as Agincourt. It would be ludicrous to suppose that rulers did not reflect upon what had gone wrong-or, in the case of the English, what had gone right-but only rarely do they admit us to their debate. There are no known records of any discussion of Agincourt in the archives of the French royal administration. The latter show the impact of the battle only obliquely, in, for instance, legal cases concerning the dower rights of women who were unsure whether their husband had survived, perhaps as a prisoner, or had been killed at the battle,1 or in the need to make many new appointments to offices in local administration to replace those who had lost their lives. The general level of chaos and disruption is revealed by confusion over who precisely had been appointed and by whom.<sup>2</sup> Even before Agincourt, royal authority in France was in disarray. The insanity of King Charles VI had created a power vacuum which the princes of the blood vied to fill. Civil war had erupted between the Burgundian group, headed by Duke John (the Fearless), and the Armagnac party, associated with the dukes of Orléans (first the king's brother, Louis, duke of Orléans, until his assassination in 1407, and later the latter's son, Charles).3 The battle of Agincourt did little to unify these factions. Indeed, it may even have served to make their divisions more bitter, for as this paper will reveal there is strong evidence that each faction soon sought to blame the other for the defeat.

Although there are no newspapers for the period, we do have writings which have elements in common with the journalistic products of today, chronicles where sensationalism is by no means lacking, or where a particular viewpoint is deliberately purveyed for the sake of forming opinion or of reflecting the existing prejudices of the intended audience. Within the chronicle of the Religieux of Saint-Denis, for instance, we have a narrative of the battle which includes some attempt to explain why things happened. The chronicler advances reasons which we would consider "military." Thus, the lightly armed English archers were able to harry the heavily armed, slow moving French men-at-arms, who were so closely packed that they were unable to lift their weapons. But the chronicler also points to broader differences.

The English troops were well disciplined, whereas the French knights were over confident and so presumptuous of their impending success that they rejected the assistance of the Parisians and sent home their crossbowmen. The chronicler follows his account of the battle with a reflection upon it in quasi-sermon form. This emphasizes the shame which the defeat had poured upon the French nobility and on the nation as a whole, a nation renowned for its military prowess in days of old. Indeed, as the chronicler exclaims, "I would have rather buried in eternal oblivion events whose telling is more suited to the tragic muse than to history if I did not have a duty to transmit to posterity the reversals as well as the commendable deeds of France." This leads naturally to an account of the sadness and lamentation which necessarily followed, as a result from personal loss and national humiliation. Such a disaster was clearly God's doing, being His response to the sins and vices which had abounded in the kingdom of France of late on the part of both clergy and laity. "Considering so many vices and so much indifference in place of what is holy, just, reasonable and honest, we can say with the divine Psalmist 'We are all fallen: we have all become useless.' There is no one who does good, no one at all."

One reason the *Religieux* advances for the manifestation of God's wrath is the mutual animosity between Burgundians and Armagnacs. "The knights and esquires have not forgotten that the dukes and princes of the kingdom, prompted by the devil, enemy of peace, have cast off the sentiments of mutual affection occasioned by the much-to-be-lamented death of the duke of Orléans, and have committed themselves to a mortal hatred and have broken many times the oaths which they had sworn." The chronicler concludes, "It is the Almighty, I say, who, pushed to the limit by the sins of the inhabitants, has inspired in one people [i.e., the English] the audacity to invade the kingdom and in the others [i.e., the French] the thought of flight. I do not think France has experienced such a disaster since fifty years ago and which will have, in my opinion, as grave consequences [this is obviously an allusion to the capture of John II at Poitiers in 1356]."

The date of composition of this material is not exactly certain but a reference at the end of the diatribe suggests it was within a year or so of the battle and before the second English invasion of August 1417. ("The king of England has returned to his lands with the firm intention of raising new troops in even larger numbers to attack the French a second time, as soon as the spring comes, and he has repeated to the lords his prisoners more than once, It is you, my dear cousins, who will pay all the

costs of the wages'.") In medieval terms this is an early reaction to Agincourt. The best known and most often cited French accounts of the battle, namely those by Enguerran de Monstrelet, Jean le Fèvre, and Jean de Waurin, date to the 1440s and 1450s. It is fair to say that these writers may have been collecting material from an earlier point (after all, Le Fèvre and Jean de Waurin were both eyewitnesses to the battle), but their full narratives were not completed until at least thirty years after the battle.<sup>5</sup>

Today's newspapers provide an instant glimpse into the impact of and reactions to events. Things moved more slowly in the middle ages. There was thus time for the chroniclers and other commentators to reflect upon events and to be influenced by later developments. This is particularly significant in the context of French reactions to the battle of Agincourt. The early responses, such as that of the Religieux, tend to apportion blame in a rather general fashion. Although, as we saw, the civil war is mentioned as a factor, the chronicler makes no attempt to blame one party or the other. The same is true of an anonymous poem which found its way into the Journal of Nicholas de Baye, greffier of the parlement of Paris, and into Monstrelet's chronicle.6 This too is likely an early response to the disaster, for it refers to "young regent full of his own self-will," a reference to the Dauphin Louis who died on 18 December 1415. Its insertion into the Journal of de Baye, which terminates in 1417, also seems to confirm an early date. This poem too refers only in general terms to "blood so divided that no one cared at all for the other." Indeed this phrase and others within the poem show some similarity with the words of the Religieux, and as the authorship of the poem is ascribed to "some clerks of the kingdom of France," there may indeed be a stronger link. Furthermore, its inclusion in de Baye's Journal suggests a Parisian origin for the poem.

It did not take long, however, for a more politicized interpretation of the battle to emerge. Duke John of Burgundy had not been present at the battle although members of his party and family had been. His brother, Anthony, Duke of Brabant, was among those slain. Even so, there can be no doubt that the battle dealt a greater blow to the Armagnac group, not least because of the capture and imprisonment of Charles, Duke of Orléans, and served therefore to facilitate the rise of Burgundian power. The Armagnac response to this seems to have included accusations that Duke John's inactivity in 1415 had assisted the English.

The Burgundian counterblast is revealed by a manifesto which the duke issued at Hesdin on 25 April 1417, charging his enemies with, amongst other things, "deliberately permitting Henry V to invade France and win the battle of Agincourt." When the Monstrelet and his fellow Burgundian chroniclers penned their works in the later decades, they were at pains to explain away the duke's absence from Agincourt, and more specifically that of his son and successor, Philip the Good, under whose patronage they were writing. Thus emphasis was placed on how the Armagnacs had deliberately sought to exclude Duke John, hoping to keep all the glory of the anticipated victory for themselves. As for Philip, he was as anxious as anyone to serve against the English but his father, fearful for his son's safety, had instructed the latter's masters to keep him at home. Meanwhile, Jean Juvenal des Ursins, in his Histoire de Charles VI, written in the late 1430s or 1440s, maintained an anti-Burgundian stance. Several

were shocked by the fact that the Duke of Burgundy who had been quite close to the area where the battle was fought, had not been present or had sent assistance. It was commonly reported that he was not bothered in the slightest . . . in Paris there were even some who seemed pleased and expressed sighs of joy, saving that the Armagnacs had been defeated and the duke of Burgundy would at this time increase his position." Later in the section, des Ursins contrasts the good conduct of the English king and his troops towards civilians with the behavior of the Burgundians during their attack on Soissons in 1414. There was an additional link alluded to here. It was claimed that the Burgundians had caused damage to the shrine at Soissons of Saints Crispin and Crispinianus: it was, of course, on the festival day of those very saints that Henry V humiliated the French at Agincourt.

Later chronicle writings thus reveal a politicization of blame. This probably began fairly soon after the event, but was fueled by later events, most notably by the assassination of Duke John the Fearless at the hands of the Armagnacs on 10 September 1419, and by the subsequent Burgundian alliance with the English. The development of this politicization of blame is particularly well illustrated through two literary works, one Armagnac, the other Burgundian, which examine the Battle of Agincourt. There is arguably only a narrow divide between chronicles and literature.

Medieval chronicles owed much to literary traditions and devices and there was not as strict a distinction as we might expect today between the style and format of different genres. Thus the Religieux of Saint-Denis is able to mix straight reportage with moral judgment and religious outpourings. Political comment was not confined to narrative. There is a well established tradition of political literature which ranged from obvious, and to us rather trite, celebratory verses such as are found in the Agincourt carol, to works of a rather more sophisticated and oblique approach but which nonetheless conveyed a strong political message. 10 Indeed, medieval love of contrivance and obfuscation, perhaps accompanied by practical reasons for hiding a political view within a work which could be interpreted as a straight literary creation. led to the composition of many such pieces which could be read at different levels. Poetry was a particularly useful vehicle for this multi-layered meaning.

Both of the works under construction here are in verse form. Alain Chartier's Livre des Quatre Dames is a work of 3,531 lines which falls into the tradition of debate literature.11 Four ladies who have suffered as a result of Agincourt put forward their case in turn and the poet is asked to choose which is the most wretched among them. This work, I argue, is intended as a means of blaming the Burgundians for the defeat. The second work, LePastoralet, is an anonymous work of 9,141 octosyllabic lines of rhyming couplets. 12 As its name suggests, it is a "pastorale," where shepherds and shepherdesses act out scenes within a rural setting. But it is also an allegory. Each of the characters has a fictional name but it is clear which real historical personages they represent. Indeed, the author provides us with a key to identities almost at the end of the poem. Even if the poem were read aloud, thereby depriving the listener of our advantage in being able to turn to the end (or to the critical apparatus) first, it would have been obvious who was meant by the characters. Thus it is the Lupalois, the cunning wolves, who are the Armagnacs, who are here to blame for the defeat at

Agincourt. The Léonois, or Burgundians, are the heroes of the day. These two works, therefore, are of considerable interest in examining French reactions to Agincourt, and in particular in showing how a politicization of blame was generated.

At the time of the battle, Alain Chartier was in Paris as a secretary and notary at the royal court. At the taking of Paris by John the Fearless in May 1418, he was one of many who fled south with the Dauphin Charles, remaining with the latter both in his years of exile and after his return to Paris at the English expulsion in 1436. Chartier wrote several works which lamented the sorry state of France at the hands of the Burgundians and English, but the Livre des Quatre Dames is probably the earliest as it seems to have been written before the Burgundian capture of Paris, and thus within one to three years of Agincourt. The poem is obviously a response to Agincourt although it does not note the battle by name. Indeed that in itself is significant in revealing the level of horror and disquiet which the defeat had generated. Chartier instead speaks simply of "la malhereuse journée." The avoidance of the uttering of the hateful name of Agincourt is found again in half of the manuscripts of his Quadrilogue invectif.13 It remains unclear whether Chartier started a trend which others followed or whether there was already a widespread and deliberate habit of avoiding the specific mention of the battle by name, but in the early sixteenth century, Philippe de Vigneulles of Metz tells us that the battle was popularly called "la malheureuse journée."14

Whatever the case, the content of the poem leaves no doubt that the event with which it was concerned was Agincourt. In its main body, four ladies appear to the poet. Each has suffered as a result of the wretched day. The first has lost her husband (or lover), killed in the battle. The lover of the second lady was captured, and is now languishing as a prisoner in England. The third lady's lover is missing in action. The lover of the fourth lady had fled in cowardice from the battle. Attempts have been made to identify these ladies and their lovers as specific historical characters. The most convincing identification is that of the second lady with Bonne of Armagnac, the wife of Charles, Duke of Orléans, the most celebrated prisoner taken by the English at Agincourt; he remained in captivity in England until 1440.

But such identifications are unnecessary for contemporary understanding of the poem. The women were used as a way of personifying the various impacts of the battle on French society. There was a high mortality rate, and many men of rank were taken prisoner, itself a shaming blow to French chivalry. There was the great uncertainty caused by the battle: the third lady's ignorance of whether her lover lived is given reality in several cases before the law courts where the fate of Agincourt's combatants was unclear. The plights of the first three ladies can therefore be seen to epitomize three "reactions" to Agincourt. These ladies grieved, as did France, in the wake of a disaster which was a blow to individuals as well as to the nation itself. But it is the action of the fourth man which is the most significant in my current discussion. He fled from the battle as a coward, and as a traitor. He is thus to blame for the defeat, and for the sufferings of the other three ladies and the humiliation of the French nation as a whole. He therefore symbolizes the culture of blame, and brings us full square to the central issue of this paper.

Chartier's poem is intended as means of apportioning blame, and is thus best seen as a political work displaying his anti-Burgundian stance. Although names are not named, there would be no doubt in contemporary minds, most especially in his intended Armagnac readership, that the cowards and the traitors were the Burgundians. In this context, the poem is most artfully crafted. Time and again the reader is intentionally misled, and seduced into believing that the author's purpose is otherwise. Thus the opening section of the poem gives the impression that this is a straightforward poem about unrequited love. The poet tells us he has lost his love, his Belle, and that there is thus no joy left in life. He wanders through a beautiful rural landscape but he does not see it because he is completely caught in his own melancholy. But then he meets the four ladies of the poem, whose sorrow is, to the reader at least, greater than his own. They ask him to arbitrate over who is the most wretched, who has suffered most as a result of the battle? After hearing their cases, the poet declares that he is inadequate for this task of deciding among them. Thus he tells the ladies that he shall ask judgment of his Belle, for it is only right that a worthy woman should decide on a matter concerning her own gender. Yet this is not a poem on or for women. The poet's Belle is surely France herself. Elsewhere in his writings Chartier portrayed France as a woman, as for instance in his Quadrilogue invectif of 1422, where she is portrayed as a distressed lady of noble birth whose once beautiful robe, embroidered with the fleur de lys, is now dirty and torn, a reference to the divisions and destruction of France in the face of civil war and English invasion.

The poem leaves no doubt that the cowardly lover of the fourth lady is to blame for the sorrows of the other three ladies and of France itself. The first lady, who has suffered the most, blames such cowards and traitors for the death of her lover. She is given the greatest number of lines, thus emphasizing the horror brought about by such treachery. The fourth lady gives an account of her own shame and grief brought about by her lover's cowardice. This theme is returned to at the end of the poem when the first lady is allowed a reprise of her manifest sorrow. We are thus left in no doubt as to who is to blame. Stress is throughout on the fact that the French lost the battle because of the behavior of those who fled. Although not explicit, Chartier was surely intending his readers to take the cowards and traitors as Burgundians. Indeed the lack of explicitness should not perturb us. It may be explained by Chartier's fear of recriminations in the troubled political arenas of 1416-1418, but it is much more likely that he deliberately chose to leave his attribution of blame vague. By doing so, he put doubts and questions into people's minds, thereby sharpening the sense of blame. The judgment of Belle is never revealed in the poem. There was no need to do so, and again the lack of an obvious "denouement" in the poem strengthens its effectiveness as a political work. That is not to say, of course, that we cannot take the plight of the first three ladies at face value. Women did suffer in all the ways outlined. But their sufferings were the sufferings of the nation as a whole, and were the result not of English military superiority but of Burgundian treachery.

Given the nature of French internal divisions, and the political triumph of the Burgundians in both the seizure of Paris of 1418 and in their role in the Treaty of Troyes (1420), we should not be surprised to find a Burgundian work which tries to

apportion blame for Agincourt in precisely the opposite direction, namely towards Chartier's own political party, the Armagnacs. This work is our other literary composition, Le Pastoralet. It survives in only one manuscript. Le Pastoralet post-dates Chartier's Livre, for it was written after the assassination of Duke John the Fearless of Burgundy at the hands of the Dauphin Charles' men on 10 September 1419. The recent editor of the work suggests a date of composition of 1422-1425, arguing that the text implies that Henry V is also dead. It would be going too far to suggest that Le Pastoralet was written in direct answer to Chartier's Livre. The subject matter of Le Pastoralet is more broadly based, covering not only the Battle of Agincourt, which it calls the battle of Ruisseauville, but also other events of the reign of Charles VI. Thus the poem is not a response to Agincourt per se but rather a reflection on several years of Armagnac/Burgundian hostilities set against the context of English invasion. The theme of the work is introduced obliquely in the main section, providing some parallel with Chartier's Livre des Quatre Dames. But its political stance is made much more explicit than in Chartier's work, for the prologue to Le Pastoralet praises John the Fearless and laments his death. Moreover, the names chosen for the various parties make clear the bias immediately. The choice of a lion personification for the Burgundians was justified in heraldic terms but was also intended to provide an immediately transparent contrast with the Armagnacs, characterized as wolves.

The battle occupies the whole of chapter 14 (lines 6,355-6,736). There is another brief mention in five lines almost at the end of the poem (lines 9,090-9,095). The fact that the battle is returned to at this late point emphasizes its significance in the work as a whole, and more specifically in the poem's overriding intention to elevate the Burgundians above their Armagnac enemies.

The reader is left in no doubt by the end of chapter 14 that the behavior of the Armagnacs was the cause of the French defeat. But, as with Chartier, the poet does not divulge his political message immediately. The early sections of the chapter give an increasingly gory account of the battle, while retaining the pastoral allegories.

... the great battle began, but the outset was so fierce, cruel and horrible, and wonderously terrible. In order to kill or slay, arrows, hard irons with sharpened tips, were made to fly through the air between them more densely than hailstones fly in winter in the cold wind. Thus they took more light from the sun than would a black cloud have done. Then they engaged, throwing three-pointed darts. Many were felled by these darts so harshly and to such an extent that, wounded, they were unable to rise to their feet ever again. Then without seeking any end to this, hand to hand they struck with their hoes and with their sharpened crooks, effecting great scything blows by the strength of their arms . . . They each struck the other to the teeth with great and hard blows, and with cruel cutting down of shepherds, lying dead in the meadow. So many heads cut off, so many feet, fists, so many arms without hands. I think there never was so much shedding of human blood nor a slaughter more cruel. So much did the shepherds mortally injure each other, cutting off limbs and heads. Because of the bloody tempest and the great October rain, the place was completely muddy where the combatants stood, bogged down, sullied and shamed by the muck. There in the dung, without a bed, were the dead sleeping, one on top of the other, in piles, heaps, some lying upwards, some face down. The field is covered with them. There were many who died lying among the dead without receiving a single blow. Oh, the harshness and wickedness of it all! Oh, the cruelest of battles . . . The streams run through the valleys, the rivers run red.

The issue of who was to blame is then raised. To the reader or listener, the full significance of this distribution of blame was surely reinforced by recollection of the preceding sections where the bloody horrors of the battle were stressed. Those deemed responsible would have much to answer for, given the scale and nature of the disaster. The poet leaves no possibility of doubt. "The Florentinois (the French) flee, they who were ten against one, for everyone did not do their proper duty. If the Léonois (Burgundians), who were at the front, did well, the Lupalois (Armagnacs), at the rear where they could not be reached, did nothing at all. The failure of the Lupalois gives the victory to the Panalois (English)." The Armagancs are the villains of the piece, the Burgundians the heroes.

Having made his political point, the poet almost immediately stresses the scale of the disaster. "Many lively and noble shepherdesses are left alone without their lovers. For so many have died . . . Shepherdesses, weep for them, lament with great sobbing because you have lost your lover. Weep with your eyes, weep often, for here perishes fine youth." Chartier's focus on the impact of the battle on women, and on France as a whole, is thus replicated but with the Armagnacs now cast as the villains. The poet then heaps up further praise on the Burgundians, who give themselves up to death. If the Armagnacs had fought in this way then the English would have been defeated. But the Armagnacs flee, outdoing each other in their efforts to do so. Their cowardice and their treachery is thus emphasized. As the poet puts it,

The Léonois would rather give up their soul than flee. Each one continues to strike without sparing himself, even up to the point of death. Had they been supported just a little bit by the Lupalois and had come forward as the Léonois had done, then the Panalois would have been dead. But the Lupalois flee over hills and vales, outdoing each other in their efforts to do so, without any fear of reproach. The grassy byways and green fields are covered with treacherous fugitives. But many died in their flight, having a villainous death which they entirely deserved. The valiant were killed in the battle, and the miscreants in flight.

Then comes another central point. "The Florentinois (the French) were foolish to give battle without Léonet (John the Fearless) for the Panalois feared him. Because of the sayings of Merlin, they took him as an Apollo. If his name alone had been cried boldly in the hard and fierce battle, the Panalois would not have lasted very long, but would have fled as does the hare from the dogs." This was being rather careless with the truth for the duke may have deliberately absented himself from the battle. But his absence was manipulated by the author of *Le Pastoralet* to emphasize the duke's shabby treatment by his enemies when they had control of the government. Moreover, it was a very powerful point of anti-Armagnac propaganda to argue that the battle might have turned out differently had the duke been present. The point made here by the poet links directly back to the prologue of the poem where Duke John the Fearless is praised as "most worthy and valiant... who loved

the king, Charles VI, the kingdom and the public good with complete and total

Each poem gives an interesting and hitherto unnoticed insight into French reacloyalty." tions to Agincourt. For both authors, as for other French commentators such as the Religieux of Saint Denis, it was the failings of the French rather than the military superiority of the English which explained the defeat. In the two poems under discussion, such failings were set in a specific political context. These poems were composed for audiences already receptive to such interpretations and to such apportioning of blame. Together they furnish excellent examples of the way literary forms were exploited to put forward a political message, and a salutary reminder that literature of the medieval period needs to be interpreted not only by literary scholars but also by historians.

## NOTES

- 1. Anne Curry, The Battle of Agincourt. Sources and Interpretations (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 473-476, 480-481.
- 3. For studies of the period, see in particular Richard C. Familgetti, Royal Intrigue. Crisis at 2. Archives Nationales, Xia 8603, fol. 2r. the Court of Charles VI: 1392-1420 (New York: AMS Press, 1986), and Bertrand Schnerb, Les Armagnacs et les Bourguignons. La maudite guerre (Paris: Librarie Académique Perrin, 1988).
- 4. Le Religieux de Saint-Denis, Histoire de Charles VI, ed. Louis Bellaguet, Collection de documents inédits sur l'histoire de France, 6 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1839–1852), 5: 542-81, translated in Curry, The Battle of Agincourt, 99-110, 336-340.
- 6. Nicholas de Baye does not mention the battle in his journal although another hand has added a version of an anonymous poem in French on the battle under de Baye's own heading of 1415. Le Journal de Nicholas de Baye, greffier du parlement de Paris, 1400-1417, ed. Alexandre Tuetey, 2 vols. (Paris: Société de l'Histoire de France, 1885-1888), 2: 219-220. The poem is also found in the chronicle of Enguerran de Monstrelet; La Chronique d'Enguerran de Monstrelet, ed. L. Douet-d'Arcq, 6 vols. (Paris: Société de l'Histoire de France, 1857-1862), 3: 123. There is an English translation in Curry, The Battle of Agincourt,
  - 7. Richard Vaughan, John the Fearless (London: Longman Press, 1966), 215.

  - 9. Jean Juvenal des Ursins, Histoire de Charles VI, roi de France, Nouvelle collection des mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France, série 1 (Paris: Chez l'editeur du commentaire analytique du code civil, 1836), 2: 518-20, translated in ibid., 128-135.
  - 10. See the discussion of the Agincourt Carol and other poems in ibid., 274-300.
  - 11. Printed in full in The Poetical Works of Alain Chartier, ed. John C. Laidlaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 198-304.
  - 12. Chroniques relatives à l'histoire de la Belgique sous la domination des ducs de Bourgogne, ed. Henri Kervyn de Lettenhove, 3 vols. (Brussels: Imprimerie Nationale, 1870–1876), 2: 573–852. For a more recent edition see Le Pastoralet, ed. Jean Blanchard (Paris: Presses Universitaires
  - 13. As noted by Margaret S. Blayney in the introduction to her edition of Fifteenth-Century English Translations of Alain Chartier's Le Traité de l'Esperance and Le Quadrilogue Invectif, Early English Text Society, original series 279 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

14. La Chronique de Philippe de Vigneulles, ed. Charles Bruneau, 2 vols. (Metz: Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Lorraine, 1927–129), 2: 169.