

## 'My gunners will burn your houses, my soldiers will pillage them': what French people were singing about when they sang about Napoleon

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**Abstract**—Fifty years after his death, almost the only song that French people still sung about Napoleon retold his conquest of the city of Mantua in 1797. 'Le bombardement de Mantoue' is an example of a popular European folk genre, the siege song. Siege songs use the metaphor of a violent wooer and a reluctant maiden to narrate the capture of cities. They circulated, in print and orally, from the mid seventeenth to the mid nineteenth centuries, updated for all conflicts by the substitution of the name of the besieger and the city. While often factually inaccurate, such songs are evidence of historical consciousness, and they could be used to express an identification with a national or political cause. They also anchored an early modern concept of war in popular culture, in which victory was measured in territory acquired, and in which a rampaging soldiery was pitted against a civilian and female population. Sieges envisaged as a violent courtship relocated military events into the language of interpersonal relationships, and thus they became relevant in many day-to-day contexts. Siege songs are akin to *pastourelles*, the most popular of all song genres, but whereas in the *pastourelle* a knight or lord pursues a shepherdess, in 'Le bombardement de Mantoue' socially superior women are violated by lower class men. This fantasy of social, as well as sexual, conquest helps explain the continuing popularity of this song.

**Key words:** sieges, customs of war, broadside ballad, Napoleon Bonaparte, Mantua, folk song, *pastourelle*

Patrice Coirault (1875–1959), the leading twentieth-century scholar of French folk song, undertook the vast project of cataloguing French song types. His *Répertoire des chansons françaises de tradition orale* has been revised and expanded by other song scholars since his death.<sup>1</sup> It contains just one song type that refers to Napoleon Bonaparte by name, to which Coirault gave the

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<sup>1</sup> P. Coirault, G. Delarue, Y. Fédoroff and S. Wallon (eds), *Répertoire des chansons françaises de tradition orale*, 3 vols (Paris, 1996–2006).

generic title 'Le bombardement de Mantoue' [The Bombardment of Mantua] and the type number 7001.

Such paucity will surprise anyone familiar with English folk song in which Napoleon is a frequently encountered character. In the anglophone equivalent to Coirault's catalogue, the Roud Song Index, he appears hundreds of times and is the main subject for a dozen or so song types, including 'Bonaparte on Saint Helena' (Roud 349), 'Boney was a Warrior' (Roud 485), 'The Bonny Bunch of Roses' (Roud 664), 'The Grand Conversation on Napoleon' (Roud 1189), 'Napoleon's Dream' (Roud 1538), 'The Green Linnet' (Roud 1619), 'The Conqueror of All Nations' (Roud 1626), 'The Deeds of Napoleon' (Roud 2419), among others.<sup>2</sup>

Historians of nineteenth-century France will likewise be astounded at Napoleon's absence because they know that, in addition to songs composed before and during the Empire itself, dozens of songs about Napoleon circulated in print in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, covertly during the Restoration, more openly under Louis-Philippe, and with official blessing under Louis-Napoleon.<sup>3</sup> They were sold as song sheets and booklets by pedlars, performed in bars and on public squares, as well as in the caveaux, goguettes and guinguettes which were such a feature of nineteenth-century sociability.<sup>4</sup> Napoleonic songs and singers drove to distraction the Restoration authorities charged both with controlling street literature and the display of seditious political feelings.<sup>5</sup> Béranger is only the most famous celebrant of the cult of Napoleon in song; there were many others, some of whose names are known, some who remain anonymous.<sup>6</sup>

There are several possible reasons why these 'Memories of the People'—to borrow the title of Béranger's most successful Napoleonic ballad, and in which he insisted that 'Fifty years from now, the humble cottage will know no other history' than Napoleon's—are not reflected in Coirault's catalogue. Collecting folk song from oral performance was a practice that only took off in France under the Second Empire, in part at the instigation of the new regime.<sup>7</sup> But the most fecund period for collecting in French-speaking parts of the country was the first decades of the Third Republic.<sup>8</sup> By that time the misfortunes of the

<sup>2</sup> V. Gammon, 'The Grand Conversation: Napoleon and British popular balladry', *RSA Journal*, 137 (1989), 665–74; O. Cox Jensen, *Napoleon and British Song, 1797–1822* (Basingstoke, 2015). The Roud Index can be consulted online at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library: <https://www.vwml.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> P. Darriulat, *La Muse du peuple: chansons politiques et sociales en France, 1815–1871* (Rennes, 2011); on Napoleon as a subject of song, 96–108.

<sup>4</sup> M.-V. Gauthier, *Chanson, sociabilité et grivoiserie au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1992); P. Brochon, *La Chanson française*, 2 vols (Paris, 1956–57); P. Brochon, *La Chanson sociale de Béranger à Brassens* (Ézanville, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> B. Ménager, *Les Napoléon du peuple* (Paris, 1988). Any incursion into the archives of the Restoration will reveal evidence of the regime's obsession with Napoleonic propaganda songs.

<sup>6</sup> S.-A. Leterrier, *Béranger: des chansons pour un peuple citoyen* (Rennes, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> J. Cheyronnaud, *Instructions pour un recueil général de poésies populaires de la France, 1852–1857* (Paris, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> G. Delarue, 'Les collectes de chansons de langue française', in *La Bretagne et la littérature orale en Europe*, ed. F. Postic (Brest, 1999), 241–8.

nephew had done much to extinguish lyrical enthusiasm for the uncle. In addition, it must be admitted that folk song in French, as distinct from the minority languages of the hexagon, has a comparatively poor repertoire of narrative songs of any kind, and especially songs that reference historical personages and events.<sup>9</sup> The preponderance of lyric over narrative is one of the defining aesthetics of French folksong.

It is also relevant that Coirault and his followers took a stronger line than their English counterparts on the definition of folk song and its relationship to print. Most of the anglophone songs mentioned above had reached their audience in the form of broadside sheets. Coirault was well aware that print also played a role in the creation of the folk song corpus in France, but he was only interested in songs that had passed into oral tradition, the most evident sign of which was that each type existed in multiple textual variants. Songs whose performance relied on the use of print were therefore excluded. For Coirault, Béranger's songs would not count as folk song, even if there was evidence that they were still being sung fifty years later, unless they had undergone this process of oralization.

However, when one goes beyond the catalogue to look at individual collections made from the 1860s to the 1890s, the scarcity of songs that mention Napoleon or reference his regime remains striking, especially as these were precisely the kind of songs that collectors had searched for. Historical songs were the most sought after genre at this époque, and collectors, who were often Republican in their sympathies, were particularly keen to find folk sources for that democratic and national history that Michelet had ascribed to oral tradition and in which the deeds of great men were supposed to loom large.<sup>10</sup> They enquired for the songs about Napoleon which they remembered hearing in their childhood, but they found only the debris. Such was the experience of Paul Sébillot, the leading French folklorist of the Third Republic. After concerted efforts to assemble 'the great legendary of France' urged by Michelet, he concluded 'A search through folksong collections produces only a tiny number of texts about Napoleon and his family, and even these are often labelled as having fallen into disuse.'<sup>11</sup> Julien Tiersot was barely more successful when collecting in the reputedly Bonapartist regions of Dauphiné and Savoie in the early 1890s. Even there, Napoleonic songs were confined to manuscript songbooks from earlier in the century; few people still sang them and 'in ten years time, nobody will know a word of these songs anymore'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> M. Simonsen, 'The corpus of French ballads', in *The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies*, ed. T. A. McKean (Logan, UT, 2003), 285–94.

<sup>10</sup> J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1886 [1847]), ii, 5–6.

<sup>11</sup> P. Sébillot, *Croyances, mythes et légendes des pays de France* (Paris, 2002 [1904–1906]), 1480–81.

<sup>12</sup> J. Tiersot, *Chansons populaires des Alpes françaises. Savoie et Dauphiné* (Grenoble, 1903), 71.

The impression given by Coirault's catalogue that the only popular song which served as an effective vehicle for Napoleon's memory was 'Le Bombardement de Mantoue' is also confirmed by contemporary evidence. In his memoirs the mason and Republican leader from the Creuse, Martin Nadaud, recalled the 'veillées' (winter evening gatherings including family and friends) of his youth in the 1820s. His father Léonard Nadaud, although illiterate himself, had acquired one of Béranger's songbooks and persuaded his son to recite its contents so frequently that the audience knew the choruses by heart. However, when his uncle and father, both former soldiers, got together the song they actually sang, and which drew cries of admiration from the audience, concerned 'les dames de Vienne' [the ladies of Vienna] who, after a battle lost by the Austrians, came to implore the generosity of Napoleon: "De votre argent Mesdames, je ne sais quoi en faire; mes canonnières brûleront vos maisons, mes soldats les pilleront!" [I have no use for your money ladies; my gunners will burn your houses, my soldiers will pillage them.]<sup>13</sup> Although the Nadaud brothers had relocated the events from the plains of Lombardy to the banks of the Danube this is, nonetheless, a version of Coirault 7001 'Le Bombardement de Mantoue'.

My purpose in this article is to explain why this particular song type enabled Napoleon to retain some purchase on the popular imagination when all the others about him had fallen away. His continued presence in popular culture obviously had potential political significance. However, as communicative acts songs are multivalent, they can carry different messages and mean different things to their various audiences according to when, and how, they are sung. Napoleon, his gunners and soldiers were performing more than one communicative function in nineteenth-century France.

# I

In order to understand what these functions were, we must first familiarize ourselves with the song itself, while bearing in mind Coirault's injunction that a folksong is only a folksong if it exists in variant forms. Nonetheless, the version given below does contain most of the key motifs and rhymes. It was sung by Jean Joly of Vandenesse (Nièvre), and collected from him by the folklorist Achille Millien and his musician companion Jean-Grégoire Penavaire in 1887, when Joly was about 65 years old.<sup>14</sup> Millien, incidentally, made exactly the same observation as Sébillot that Napoleonic songs, which were still common in the 1850s and 1860s, had all but disappeared by the 1880s, with this one exception.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> M. Nadaud, *Mémoires de Léonard, ancien garçon maçon*, ed. M. Agulhon (La Geneytouse, 2011 [1895]), 53.

<sup>14</sup> A. Millien, *Chants et chansons: littérature orale et traditions du Nivernais* (Paris, 1906), i. 303–4.

<sup>15</sup> Millien, *Chants et chansons*, i. 303–4.

**'La Prise de Mantoue'**

1. La ville de Mantoue,/ Grand Dieu! Qu'elle est jolie! Elle est joli', parfaite assurément./ O vous, Français, entrez dedans.
2. Bonaparte a t-envoyé/ Quatre de ses gendarmes/ — C'est Bonaparte qui nous envoie ici,/ Si vous voulez vous rendre à lui.
3. Va dire à Bonaparte,/ Ton gouverneur de France,/ Va donc lui dir' que nous nous foutons de lui,/ Autant le jour(e) que la nuit.
4. Bonaparte a fait braquer/ Ses canons d'assurance./ Au premier coup que l'canon a tiré,/ La jolie ville en a tremblé.
5. Les dames de Mantoue/ Montaïent sur les rempar(es)/ — O Bonaparte, apaise tes canons;/ Contribution nous te païerons.
6. Quelle contribution/ Me païerez-vous, mesdames?/ — Contribution de cinq cent mille écus,/ Que tes canons ne tirent plus!
7. —Mesdam', de votre argent/ Je ne saurais qu'en faire/ Oh! mes canons brûleront vos maisons/ Et mes soldats les pilleront.
8. Courage, mes soldats! / La ville est au pillage./ Et nous tuerons les petits et les grands,/ Et nous prendrons l'or et l'argent!

'Le bombardement de Mantoue' is an example of a very popular genre, the siege song. Like most examples of this genre, it opens with a tribute to the beauty of the city, emphasizing her desirability. The besieging general sends a spokesman/men to summon the city to surrender. The city—in siege songs it is not at all unusual for the city to speak in her own person—rejects the demand. The general then readies his artillery and fires. The bombardment brings the women of the city, usually specified as the 'dames du château'—the ladies, the elite women—to the windows or ramparts to entreat with the general. They offer money as 'contribution', a technical military term meaning a payment from civilians to a military force in order to be safeguarded against pillage and destruction.<sup>16</sup> However, the general rejects the ladies' pleas and promises that his cannons will burn down their houses and his soldiers will pillage them. These two verses, the dialogue between the ladies and the general, are the most crucial element of the song; other verses might be discarded but these are always retained. On the other hand, the final verse, in which we hear the general encouraging his troops to pillage and kill all, is missing from more than half the versions for which we have the full text.

'Le bombardement de Mantoue' relies on the metaphor of the city as a woman, a virgin, whose attractive qualities enflame the lust of a besieging the general and his soldiery. The image is an ancient one, and it was more than a literary device, for its use affected the way urban governments and populations saw themselves and presented themselves to others.<sup>17</sup> During early modern

<sup>16</sup> J. A. Lynn, 'How war fed war: the tax of violence and contributions during the Grand Siècle', *J of Mod Hist*, 65 (1992), 286–310.

<sup>17</sup> Y.-M. Bercé, *Histoire des croquants: étude des soulèvements populaires au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le sud-ouest de la France* (Paris, 1974), ii, 632–4.

sieges, both the besieged and their assailants referred to this idea in their communications and rituals.<sup>18</sup> One of the mechanisms through which both parties became familiar with this image was through song. The idea of siege as courtship had been taken up in secular song by the sixteenth century if not earlier, and remained popular throughout the following centuries. Not only French songs but Spanish, Dutch and German songs were constructed as a dialogue between a virginal female city who rejects the violent affections of a would-be conqueror.<sup>19</sup> However, it was the capture by the Dutch of 's-Hertogensbosch with its famous pilgrimage statue of the 'Ugly Virgin' in 1629, followed by the sack of Magdeburg (Maid's citadel) by Imperial forces in 1631, which really established the 'siege as courtship' song as a distinct genre within the repertoire.<sup>20</sup> Its popularity continued until the end of the nineteenth century: while the French sung about the capture of Mantua, in neighbouring Belgian Flanders street singers still hawked songs about the sieges of Maastricht (1673), Lille (1708) and Luxembourg (1794–5).

Siege songs were a particular favourite with street singers because the formalism of sieges meant they always followed a similar narrative arc. Street singers usually preferred to adapt rather than invent, and in the case of sieges a familiar text could be readily updated and made newly relevant by the simple substitution of place and personal names. Such songs were then dispersed in print as well as through performance by ballad-mongers on urban streets and at provincial fairs and markets. An example is provided by the next most popular siege song in French oral tradition, Coirault 7005, which relates to the 'La Prise de Namur' [The Capture of Namur] in 1692, and which is likewise couched as a dialogue between the besieging general, the city and in this case the city's preferred but sadly ineffectual lover, the King of Prussia. The first surviving printed version of this song appeared in a Troyes *bibliothèque bleue* chapbook of 1675, though in that variant the song was not about Namur but the 'Prise de Besançon' which had occurred the preceding year.<sup>21</sup> The same publisher updated the song to comment on the capture of Namur some years later.<sup>22</sup> Similar

<sup>18</sup> U. Rublack, 'Wench and maiden: women, war and the pictorial function of the feminine in German cities in the early modern period', *Hist Workshop J*, 44 (1997), 1–22; D. Hopkin, 'Sieges, seduction and sacrifice in Revolutionary war: the "Virgins of Verdun", 1792', *Euro Hist Quart*, 37 (2007), 528–47.

<sup>19</sup> R. Köhler, 'Um Städte werben in der deutschen volkstümlichen Poesie besonders des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts', in *Kleinere Schriften von Reinhold Köhler*, ed. J. Bolte (Berlin, 1900), iii. 371–413; J. Dumont, 'Une Chanson de colportage flamande sur la capitulation de Luxembourg en 1795', *Institut Grand-Ducal, Section de Linguistique, de Folklore et de Toponymie*, 2 (1954), 16–63.

<sup>20</sup> J. Chipps Smith, 'The destruction of Magdeburg in 1631: the art of a disastrous victory', in *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700*, ed. J. Spinks and C. Zika (Basingstoke, 2016), 247–72. Although Magdeburg is commonly cited as the take-off event for this genre, songs in the same format about 's-Hertogenbosch also had a significant diffusion in the seventeenth century.

<sup>21</sup> *Nouveau recueil des plus belles chansons et airs de cour de ce tems* (Troyes, n.d.), 9.

<sup>22</sup> P. Coirault, *Recherches sur notre chanson traditionnelle*, 44–7; P. Coirault, *Formation de nos chansons folkloriques* (Paris, 1953), i. 85.

songs continued to be sold by the professional Parisian Pont-Neuf singers and their provincial competitors during the revolutionary period, and indeed some which follow this model appeared in song books to commemorate the capture of Mantua in 1797.<sup>23</sup>

Coirault 7001 is in most respects typical of this genre of song, and one might expect that it too had been diffused through print. However, no printed versions of Coirault 7001 have yet been discovered that predate the song-collecting of the late nineteenth century. It is not implausible that they once existed—broadsides and chapbooks were ephemeral and seldom survive—but this song's popularity does not seem to have depended on the underpinning of print.

Coirault and his successors have catalogued forty-nine versions of type 7001 recorded by song collectors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mostly from France but some from Belgium, Switzerland and Canada. A separate French folksong catalogue, assembled by the Canadian Conrad Laforte, lists forty-six additional North American versions (in which this is song type A-67).<sup>24</sup> Thanks to internet search engines not available to either Coirault or Laforte, I have unearthed a further twenty-eight versions, although some of these are no more than a line of the song evoked in memoirs, like Nadaud's. Leaving aside some possible double counting and misattributions, well over a hundred singers have been recorded singing a variant of this song.

However, given the degree of variation, in what sense are we dealing with a single song? Oral tradition has little use for textual fidelity, and as we have already seen, one besieged town (Mantua) could be swapped for another (Vienna) according to the narrative needs of singers and their audience. In Canada, the most popular version of this song does not concern Napoleon at all but Louis-Joseph Papineau, the leader of the 1837–8 'Patriote' rebellion in Lower Canada. The French-Canadian historian, Edouard-Zotique Massicotte, who wanted to write a history of the rebellion based on oral accounts, recalled that in his youth there had been dozens of songs concerning Papineau, but by the time he tried to collect them 'I was able only to collect one complete song... That one complete text describes the imaginary siege of Toronto'.<sup>25</sup> Papineau's lyric memory had followed a similar trajectory in Canada to that of Napoleon in France: while once ubiquitous it been reduced to just one song.

Despite the change of location and personnel, this is none the less identifiable as a version of Coirault 7001 because it retains the same rhyme schemes, the same order of verses, much of the same dialogue and it was sung to what, despite variations, is recognizably the same tune. Readers can test the relationship of one variant to another for themselves by consulting the tape recordings

<sup>23</sup> C. Pierre, *Les Hymnes et chansons de la Révolution* (Paris, 1904), 781–2.

<sup>24</sup> C. Laforte, *Le Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française*. vol. ii, *chansons strophiques* (Québec, 1981).

<sup>25</sup> E.-Z. Massicotte, 'Papineau et la chanson', *Bulletin des recherches historiques*, 24 (1918), 6–9.

made by Jean Dumas in the 1950s and 1960s from singers from the department of the Haute-Loire. He recorded four variants of Coirault 7001: two, by Henriette Usson and Germaine Varenne, concern Mantua; one, sung by Céline Mathieu, features Toulon; and the last, sung by Virginie Granouillet, features Menton; but they audibly have a connection to each other.<sup>26</sup>

While Napoleon's siege of Mantua and Papineau's entirely fictitious siege of Toronto were the most commonly encountered variants in France and Canada, other singers recalled the capture of other cities by other besiegers. These include:

1. Turin by 'le roi' (probably Louis XIII in 1640)
2. Besançon by 'le roi' (probably Louis XIV in 1674)
3. Quebec by Sir William Phips (1690)
4. Mons by 'le roi' (probably Louis XIV in 1692)
5. Rio de Janeiro by René Duguay-Trouin (1711)
6. 'Louisbourne' (Louisbourg?) by 'le roi' (George III? in 1758?)
7. Montaigu by François de Charette (1793)
8. Bréda by 'la nation' (1793)
9. Toulon by 'le roi' (possibly a reference to the events of 1793)
10. Maastricht by 'la nation' (1794)
11. Mantua by Bonaparte (1797)
12. Unspecified Swiss city by General Schauenburg (1798)
13. Vienna by Napoleon (either 1805 or 1809)
14. Moscow by Napoleon (1812)
15. Montereau (Yonne) by unspecified general (possibly a reference to events in the 1814 French campaign)
16. Saint-Malo by Bonaparte
17. Paris by Bonaparte
18. Bonsecours (possibly a reference to the Canadian city) by Napoleon
19. Algiers (1830)
20. Toronto by Papineau (1837)
21. Fribourg (Canton Fribourg) by the Vaudois during the Swiss Sonderbund War (1847)
22. Menton by the French (possibly a reference to the cession of the County of Nice under the Treaty of Turin, 1860)

The earliest written version of Coirault 7001 concerns the 1674 siege of Besançon, discovered in a hand-written songbook compiled in the 1780s by a Savoyard, Pierre Empereur.<sup>27</sup> Although we have no other contemporary evidence for the song's performance before the nineteenth century, one can reasonably surmise that Coirault 7001 circulated orally, being renewed for each

<sup>26</sup> They can be accessed via the Base inter-régionale du patrimoine oral, <http://patrimoine-oral.org/dyn/portal/index.seam?page=home>

<sup>27</sup> Tiersot, *Chansons populaires des Alpes françaises*, 51-2.

new conflict, from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. Its origins may be earlier than that, given that the verse featuring the women on the ramparts crying out to the invading general occurs in a sixteenth-century printed collection of songs about the capture of Hesdin in 1521.<sup>28</sup>

## II

The songs corralled under the Coirault's song type 7001 invoke a series of historical events; they are not, however, a reliable guide to those events. Despite what Pierre Empereur's song claims, Besançon was not put to the sack by Louis XIV in 1674. Neither was the city of Mantua in 1797: the Austrian governor of Mantua made an honourable capitulation after a siege lasting seven months. The city was not taken by force, the garrison marched out flags deployed, drums beating, music playing, matches lit and bullets in their cheeks, following a ritual for the honourable conclusion of sieges that was already in place when Prince Thomas of Savoy surrendered Turin to the Franco-Piedmontese army in 1640, the first siege to be commemorated by this song.<sup>29</sup> The same is true of Mons and Breda, and many of the other cities mentioned by singers. Oddly, cities that were actually put to the sack, such as Pavia by Napoleon in 1796, seem not to have warranted the same lyrical tribute.<sup>30</sup>

However, at least these cities were the subjects of a siege, whereas Toronto was not captured, or even threatened, by Papineau during the Lower Canada Rebellion of 1837. There were no memorable sieges of Saint-Malo, Montereau or Menton, though one can speculate about the episodes to which these texts refer. In a few cases not only the event but the location proves to be fictional: the French-Canadian singer Suzanne Brideau sang about the capture by the king of 'Louisbourne', a city otherwise unknown to geography (the most likely possibility is that this is a reference to Louisbourg, taken by the British in 1758).<sup>31</sup>

It is worth stressing that not all songs recorded from oral tradition play quite so fast and loose with historical fact. Some songs can be so detailed and accurate that they can be cited as historical sources.<sup>32</sup> Coirault 7001, however, is just an image and a dialogue which could attach itself to any historical hook.

It would be presumptuous, then, to assume that the song encapsulated a clear sense of either history or geography for the singer. Pierre Empereur, if he followed the family tradition of travelling in eastern France as a chimney sweep, probably knew where Besançon was, but we cannot say whether he

<sup>28</sup> A. Le Roux de Lincy, *Recueil de chants historiques français depuis le XII<sup>e</sup> jusqu'au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1842), ii. 80–4.

<sup>29</sup> P. Vo-Ha, *Rendre les armes: le sort des vaincus, XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Cyzérieu, 2017), 49.

<sup>30</sup> P. G. Dwyer, "It still makes me shudder": memories of massacres and atrocities during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, *War in History*, 16 (2009), 381–405, 390.

<sup>31</sup> Archives de folklore et d'ethnologie de l'Université Laval, coll RBVL, no. 3387.

<sup>32</sup> É. Guillorel, 'Early modern justice and oral traditions: crime and punishment in Breton ballads', *Early Mod Fr Studies*, 41 (2019), 37–51.

knew which king had captured it, or when. Song collectors seldom interrogated their informants about what their songs meant to them, either in historical or emotional terms. However, on the rare occasions that they did, it appears that singers did give credence to the events depicted in this song. When François Louis Burgat, known as La Dentelle, a Swiss street pedlar and singer, sang about the siege of Fribourg by the cantonal troops of Vaud during the Sonderbund War of 1847 (an event which occurred when he was thirteen), he cried at the end of his own performance ‘Even so, it was a bad thing to pillage the common people [les petits]!’ He was apparently relieved to learn from the song collector that, in fact, the capture had passed off without violence.<sup>33</sup>

While often inaccurate, it appears that the songs they chose to sing had some sort of historical relevance—some kind of truth value—for their singers. Although people throughout France sang about the capture of Mantua, the popularity of other sieges was more regionally specific. By-and-large only Bretons sang the song about the Malouin corsair Duguay-Trouin’s capture of Rio, only the population of Chouan districts sang about Charette’s capture of Montaigu, and so on. People tended to sing about cities and sieges that had a particular meaning for them. We have already seen this in the case of Nadaud’s father and uncle; veterans of the Grande Armée, they sang about Napoleon’s capture of Vienna because his victory over his principal enemy, Austria, was also theirs.

Pierre-Auguste Paris, a French career army officer who wrote his memoirs in 1863, provides another example. Paris joined the fourteenth light infantry as an ensign in 1805, and recalled his comrades singing ‘De vos contributions, je n’en avons t’à faire/ Mes canonnières brûleront vos maisons,/ Mes chasseurs noirs les pilleront’. The black chasseurs of the ‘Légion noire’ were notoriously undisciplined, and the unit was broken up with elements used to constitute the fourteenth light infantry in 1799, years before Paris joined the regiment. Yet the song expressed, and passed on, a particular military tradition. For Paris it created a link between the legendary exploits of the black chasseurs and his own military identity.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, although the song could be readily altered to fit any event, praise any hero—royalist, counter-revolutionary, republican—for those who sung it the variant verses still conveyed a particular identity. At the very least it implied some notion of what it was to be French as opposed to, say, Austrian or Russian. When Virginie Granouillet, an octogenarian lacemaker from Roche-en-Régnier (Haute-Loire), sang in 1959 about the capture of Menton, her wish was ‘que nos français y’entrent dedans’: the potentially equivocal meaning of the phrase, given the characterization of the city as a female body, did not deter her.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> A. Rossat, ‘Vieilles chansons de France recueillies dans le Jura bernois (ancien Evêché de Bâle)’, *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde*, 14 (1910), 160–1.

<sup>34</sup> Anon., ‘Souvenirs du 14e léger (1805–1812), par un officier du corps’, *Le Carnet de la sabretache*, 134 (1904), 103–27. The author was identified by Robert Ouvrard: <https://www.napoleon-histoire.com/souvenirs-de-pierre-auguste-paris-1805-1812/>

<sup>35</sup> É. Desgrugillers and D. Perre, *Des Chansons tissées aux fuseaux: l’art de Virginie Granouillet, dentellière à Roche-en-Régnier* (Yssingeaux, 2014), 228–9.

When another lacemaker, Germaine Varenne, who lived just a few kilometres away, sang about the capture of Mantua, she mixed the song up with another song about the 1798 Egyptian campaign. Her injunction was 'embarquons-nous, Français'.<sup>36</sup> In song the French were 'nous'—'us'. In their youth both women's language of daily communication was a dialect of Occitan, so it is not insignificant that they both sang in French, and that they identified in song vicariously with the achievements of French arms.

### III

Siege songs are a vehicle for some sort of historical sensibility in other ways. They reflect a historically conditioned understanding of the means and purposes of war which, although developed in the early modern era, continued to be rehearsed in later periods even as the practice of warfare transformed. For instance, while they are inaccurate in their depictions of particular sieges, they demonstrate that singers knew how sieges ought to be conducted. Sieges were usually choreographed affairs and followed a fairly strict order: once a city was invested, the siege opened with a summation, as in the song, and if rejected this was followed, after the building of the necessary trenches, by a bombardment. The effect of the bombardment was to bring the civilian population into play, as in the song: although the military authorities were technically responsible for decisions, the municipal authorities, themselves under pressure from the civilian (and very often the female) inhabitants on the streets, would try to influence the commander, and might attempt to treat directly with the besieging army. If the city submitted without an assault, then the customs of war dictated that it should not be sacked. Only if the defenders continued to resist once a passable breach had been made in the walls would siege commanders consider delivering the city over to their own troops for a period of 24–48 hours of rape, murder and pillage.<sup>37</sup>

Although these customs, elaborated over centuries, were still cited in the eighteenth century, in practice the sacking of a besieged city had become rare before the 1790s. Civilians continued to fear such an outcome, but in most circumstances siege commanders would try to avoid it, in part because of changing sensibilities but also because of its disastrous effect on their own army's discipline. On the other hand, soldiers themselves maintained a lively interest in what they perceived as their rights of conquest. Although the British army had not been involved in the sack of a European city for a hundred years before the Peninsular War, none the less the soldiers knew that a city that had refused a summons was theirs by custom—or so said the officers trying to explain the sack of Badajoz in 1812.<sup>38</sup> The same defence, that officers were unable to

<sup>36</sup> Germaine Varenne, recorded near Chamalières (Haute-Loire) 31 Dec. 1959 by Jean Dumas: <http://patrimoine-oral.org/dyn/portal/index.seam?aloid=20155&page=alo&fonds=3>

<sup>37</sup> J. W. Wright, 'Sieges and customs of war at the opening of the eighteenth century', *Am Hist R*, 39 (1934), 629–44; C. Duffy, *The Fortress in the Age of Vauban and Frederick the Great 1660–1789* (London, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> G. Daly, "'The sacking of a town is an abomination': siege, sack and violence to civilians in British officers' writings on the Peninsular War – the Case of Badajoz', *Hist Research*, 92 (2009), 160–82.

restrain their own troops' zeal to exercise their rights, surfaces in French military memoirs as well. Siege songs may have helped convey traditions about the 'law of sack' across the eighteenth century, when it was seldom exercised, and into the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, where it resurfaced.

We should not underestimate the lure of plunder among soldiers' motivations. Colonel Paris, who cited this song in his memoirs, followed it immediately with an anecdote intended to show how the song encapsulated the military mores of the period, in which a black chasseur, on seeing a Swiss bourgeois with a red cloak, simply took it off him for his own use—a crime without consequences for the soldier and evidence of a swaggering superiority towards civilians which Paris clearly admired. The Légion Noire, reconstituted as the fourteenth light infantry, was sent down to Calabria in 1806 where the opportunities for self-enrichment were no less promising, and the pillaging of towns a fairly regular occurrence.

Siege songs were also an expression of an ancien régime understanding of success in war as something measured by the acquisition of territory, not the elimination of the enemy's threat. Even as sieges became less important to the outcome of wars during the revolutionary and Napoleonic period—according to military historians who characterize these as wars of movement—they continued to occupy a much larger place in popular culture than other forms of military engagement. Type 7001 'Le bombardement de Mantoue' is far from the only song in the Coirault catalogue about sieges: there are several others used and re-used for a variety of engagements but for the purposes of typology identified with Valenciennes (1677), Namur (1692), Coni (1740) and Hanover (1758). But there is only one song type, and that not at all popular, that refers to any land battle.

This preference is as marked in songs written and performed at the time as it is among those that were recalled and sung decades or centuries afterwards. In Constant Pierre's catalogue of the *Hymnes et chansons de la Révolution*—which we can take as fairly representative, at least as far as Parisian street-song production is concerned—there is no song that specifically mentions the battle of Valmy in its title, considered by historians as the most important engagement of the 1792 campaign in France, but twelve on the siege of Lille, as well as several songs dedicated to other sieges of the same campaign such as Thionville and Condé. There are no songs that name the Battle of Jemappes in November 1792 but three songs on Dumouriez's capture of Mons which was the immediate consequence of that success. There are no songs that name any battle in the Army of Italy's campaign in 1796–7 in the title—not Lodi, not Castiglione, not Rivoli, not Arcola—but seven on the surrender of Mantua, the event that sealed Napoleon's triumph.<sup>39</sup>

Historians have noted this predilection before. Ian Germani has argued that revolutionary publicists—whether journalists, playwrights or

<sup>39</sup> Pierre, *Les Hymnes et chansons de la Révolution*.

songwriters—preferred sieges because they provided opportunities for a republican morality tale for a nation-in-arms. The behaviour of different classes and sexes during a siege highlighted the role of treason—which was the justification for terror—while also providing a lesson in the right relationship between the defenders and the defended, especially women. In plays in particular, political and military events were mapped onto interpersonal relationships between soldiers, their lovers and their enemies, both domestic and foreign.<sup>40</sup>

The evidence assembled by Germani is cogent, but in popular culture the pattern predates the war of 1792. The audience for street songs appear to have found sieges intrinsically more compelling than battles: battles were, by-and-large, the affair of military professionals, whereas civilians were, like 'les dames de Mantoue', directly implicated in the conduct of sieges and directly threatened by their outcome. However, siege songs relied less on a dichotomy between virtue and villainy. The same song sung in triumph by the Nadaud brothers could be sung as a lament by French-Canadians over the loss of Quebec. Underlying the dialogue between the general and the ladies of the castle was the knowledge that war did not only pit two armies against each other, but also let loose soldiers of all nationalities on civilian populations. Although revolutionary plays attempted to portray enemy troops as the sole locus of barbarity, in practice neither pillage nor rape characterized one army more than another, and nor were they practiced only on conquered territories. The possibility of violence from troops supposedly from one's own side may inform the songs about the capture of French cities, such as Saint-Malo and Paris, by Napoleon.

#### IV

Siege songs can be classed as historical songs: they were inspired by historical events and they provided their audiences with notions, however vague, about the geography of states and the conduct and outcome of wars. Singers and their audiences could use siege songs to voice a historically grounded identity—as French, as victors, as soldiers, as victims, as Republicans, as Counter-Revolutionaries. However, the value of 'Le bombardement de Mantoue' as a source of information cannot explain its continued popularity. Songs that commemorated a specific event or personage were regularly composed and distributed via street singers and pedlars, but most had a very short shelf life in performance culture. This one song stayed in the popular repertoire long after almost all other historical songs had been forgotten. That longevity suggests that the song was doing something, communicating something or performing a function, which might have relatively little to do with its nominal content.

To understand what that function was, it would help to know who sang it, where, when and who to. Unfortunately, not all folksong collectors made

<sup>40</sup> I. Germani, 'Representations of the Republic at war: Lille and Toulon, 1792–1793', *Canadian J of Hist*, 29 (1994), 51–94.

a note of this kind of information. Some specialists have termed this a soldiers' song, and as the examples of the Nadaud brothers and Colonel Paris illustrate, soldiers and veterans certainly sang it.<sup>41</sup> However, its popularity was not limited to camp or accompanying marches. As exactly half of the identifiable singers of the song (in France at least) were women, it had a wider audience than the military. For example, we have already encountered a number of lacemakers from the Haute-Loire and Puy-de-Dôme departments who sang the song while working, less to regulate the pace than to amuse themselves and their co-workers. Another group who sang the song at work were the mulberry leaf gatherers working for the silk industry in Ardèche. The pharmacist Henry Vaschalde recorded that he heard the 'magnaniers' singing the song about Mantua in 1846 at Saint-Maurice-d'Ardèche, and again at Ruoms (Ardèche) in 1854, the latter time about Menton.<sup>42</sup> However, this song was not limited to any one occupation, nor one season of the year: its meanings may be linked to such contexts, but was not restricted to them.

In his study of Napoleon in British song, Oskar Cox Jensen has shown how songs that follow the former Emperor to Saint Helena, such as the popular 'Green Linnet' (Roud 1619), humanized the romantic hero by placing their emphasis on his separation from his wife and son. Both structurally and tonally, Cox Jensen argues that the song resembles a 'broken token' ballad in which a common soldier or sailor is parted from his wife or sweetheart, a very common and resonant genre of song during and after the Napoleonic wars. '[B]y envisaging a noble husband permanently separated from his family, people could articulate and indeed ennoble their own grief for lost servicemen, or—more happily—valorize the less permanent sacrifices and hardships endured whilst husbands or lovers served on foreign stations'.<sup>43</sup> Anglophone songs about Napoleon performed many tasks in addition to this sentimental function: they could, separately or simultaneously, carry political messages and indulge fantasies of social ascension (an aspect of Napoleon's legend which seems to have been of greater cultural significance outside France than within it). But the relevance of this drama of exile to many who experienced similar moments of forced separation helps explain the continuing popularity of these songs throughout the nineteenth, and indeed the twentieth centuries.

The same point, that an apparently historical song might serve another function, has been made about Greek laments for fallen cities, a prominent genre in Greek folk song. Nineteenth-century folklorists interpreted these as records of fact, as evidence of the response of Greek populations to the news at the time, and channels for the diffusion of a national memory and the creation of a national emotional community. But in practice these songs were performed to

<sup>41</sup> H. Davenson, *Le Livre des chansons, ou introduction à la connaissance de la chanson populaire française* (Neuchâtel, 1944), 223.

<sup>42</sup> H. Vaschalde, *Chansons populaires du Vivarais* (Paris, 1897), 3, 32. In 1854 Menton was yet to be incorporated into France, but the town was in the news having declared its independence from the Principality of Monaco in 1848.

<sup>43</sup> Cox Jensen, *Napoleon and British Song*, 132–3.

mark everyday experiences of loss and separation, such as funerals and gatherings to mark the departure of migrant workers. The drama of personal relationships found expression through the emotional parallelism not just with the historical catastrophe but also all the other occasions on which the song had been performed. Hence laments on the fall of Constantinople and Adrianople were also sung at weddings, to convey the sadness of the bride's family at the loss of their daughter.<sup>44</sup>

The rituals associated with rural weddings—in France as well as Greece—displayed features of a mock siege. In George Sand's ethnographic appendix to *La Mare au Diable*, she describes at length the exchange of gifts, the 'cérémonie des livrées', which took place the day before a wedding. The bridegroom's party approaches the bride's home only to find it barricaded 'as if one was preparing to sustain a siege'. The bridegroom sends his spokesman to claim admittance, but the inhabitants of the farm repulse this summons, and the initial assault. The besiegers are only allowed in after a competition to find a song that the besieged do not know. Several are named by Sand, though not 'Le Bombardement de Mantoue'. (It is worth noting, however, that the song was recorded from a female singer, mère Pulverin, in the very village, La Châtre, where Sand's wedding was supposed to take place.)<sup>45</sup> In addition they have to display the gifts they bring, a theme which also features in some siege songs where the general's army and ordnance are presented as tributes to the beauty of the city. When the door is finally opened the bridegroom's party rush in and take the house by assault.<sup>46</sup> Although Sand may have exaggerated aspects of this encounter, there is no doubt that the customs she described, of mock resistance and mock conquest, were sometimes enacted at weddings, and not just in the Berry region.<sup>47</sup> Such practices were a symbolic recognition that the bride's family suffered a loss, both personal and material, through the defection of their daughter.

The siege serves as a metaphor for courtship in what we might term, for want of a better word, a 'traditional' society, and this helps explain siege songs' longevity in oral culture. The songs are about historical events or pseudo-events, but they are also about conflicts, losses and acquisitions which are more relevant and immediate to the lives of the singers. A siege song could even be characterized as a love song; a schoolteacher, A. Defoing from Anstaing in the Nord Department, described one of his mother's songs as a love song when he sent the only two verses she recalled to the Belgian folksong collector Albert Libiez:

Non! Monsieur, retirez-vous,/ Car je ne suis pas à moi-même,/ J'ai  
un autre amant que vous/ Qui, depuis longtemps, m'aime./ Ce  
capitaine/ Est mon amant;/ Il a mine hautaine,/ Et il aura bientôt  
trente ans.

<sup>44</sup> R. Beaton, *Folk Poetry of Modern Greece* (Cambridge, 1980), 97.

<sup>45</sup> M.-L. Vincent, *Le Berry dans l'oeuvre de George Sand* (Paris, 1919), 354. Her variant of the song concerned the siege of 'Montereau'.

<sup>46</sup> G. Sand, *Le Mare au Diable* (Paris, 1846), 83–114.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Anon. [Jean-Charles-François, Baron de Ladoucette], 'Usages du Valdajot ou Valdajou (Vosges)', *Mémoires de la société nationale des antiquaires de France*, 10 (1834), 165–9.

Mon cœur! mais c'est votre beauté/ Qui m'a fait me mettre en  
campagne./ J'admire votre majesté;/ Soyez donc ma compagne!/  
Mademoiselle,/ Dessur [sic] ma foi,/ Ne soyez pas rebelle,/ Et  
mettez-vous dessous mes lois!

Libiez, however, with access to an eighteenth-century handwritten song-book compiled by the Thon family of Binche, was able to identify the verses as part of the dialogue between Prince Eugene of Savoy and the city of Lille to which he laid siege in 1708.<sup>48</sup> The Flemish version of this text, containing nearly twenty verses, continued to circulate as a broadside ballad right up to the end of the nineteenth century, but the French version had been reduced to this core declaration, and rejection, of a lover's suit.<sup>49</sup> This process—the lyricization of narrative ballads—seems to be a significant element in French folk aesthetics, and helps explain the relative paucity of historical song in Coirault's catalogue.<sup>50</sup>

The meaning of a song, or of any other communicative act, may lie less in the words than in the relationship between the performer and the audience. This is particularly true of traditional genres which rely on both parties' knowledge of previous performances. Old jokes are repeated not because they remain funny, but because they rekindle a relationship between speaker and listener founded in the past. Oral cultures inevitably encourage dialogue: communication is necessarily face-to-face and any text—a song, a riddle, a proverb—exists as part of a continuing discourse between participants in which no statement is authoritative but all require some form of answer. And for that reason, oral cultures tend also to be agonistic—an element of competition enters the exchange, as in the song contest described by Sand. And because they are agonistic, oral cultures tend also to be allusive—because too direct a challenge might lead from an exchange of words to an exchange of blows, too direct a declaration might lead to ignominious rejection. And so, in the words of the folklorist Alessandro Falassi, one has recourse to 'impersonal carriers of very personal communications'.<sup>51</sup> Whatever the context, the song remains just a song, part of the common culture: one can use it to encode a message, but no direct statement has been made which may come back to haunt the speaker. The siege of Mantua may seem a long way from the affairs of love, honour and courtship in the village, but it can be made to serve their purpose.

<sup>48</sup> A. Libiez, *Chansons populaires de l'ancien Hainaut* (Brussels, 1939), i. 24–6.

<sup>49</sup> The broadside ballad entitled 'Saemenspraek tusschen Prins Eugenius en de stad Ryssel' appears in the catalogues of all three major publishers of street literature in nineteenth-century Flanders: it is numbered no. 32 in the output of J. Thys of Antwerp, no. 52 in that of Leander van Paemel of Ghent, and no. 72 in that of Lambin-Verwaerde of Ypres. There the unnamed 'capitaine' is identified as King Louis XIV, but similarly credits him with an age of 30 years, when in fact he was nearer 60.

<sup>50</sup> D. Hopkin, 'Ballads and broadsides in France: accounting for an absence', in *Cheap Print and the People: European Perspectives on Popular Literature*, ed. D. Atkinson and S. Roud (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2019), 60–94.

<sup>51</sup> A. Falassi, *Folklore by the Fireside: Text and Context of the Tuscan Veglia* (Austin, TX, 1980), 106.

In courtship, as in war, one element of the cultural capital at stake is male honour—in competitive display with other men as much as for the benefit of women in both scenarios. But also at stake, in both scenarios, is the sexual possession of women—that might not be explicit in ‘Le bombardement de Mantoue’ but it is implied, for it inevitably would have been the consequence of the sack of the city. Ideas of sexual violence were not far removed from village courtship either: Sand’s ‘cérémonie des livrées’ has many of the features of a charivari, with its implicit claim that access to a village’s unmarried women was controlled by its young men, that they had some rights over women’s sexuality which could be forced if necessary.<sup>52</sup> As Ulinka Rublack argued about similar German songs, which circulated as broadsides in the early modern period, ‘[s]uch language reflected an everyday sympathy for the importunate and, in light of the ignominy of rejection, violent wooing of virgins’.<sup>53</sup> Given that women chose to sing ‘Le bombardement de Mantoue’ as often as men, one suspects the song reflects their experience or anticipation of violence as part of the courtship process.

That interpretation is strengthened by the commonalities between siege songs and another, even more popular, genre in French folk song, the *pastourelle*, in which a knight or ‘monsieur’, that is a person of elevated social position, attempts to woo a shepherdess, with carnal rather than honourable intentions.<sup>54</sup> Singers made this connection themselves: Jacques-Marin Garnier, a printer of popular imagery from Chartres, who learnt the song ‘La prise de Namur’ (Coirault 7005) from a worker in his father’s print-shop, described it as ‘this song with both bellicose and pastoral aspects’.<sup>55</sup>

One of the connections is that both siege songs and *pastourelles* are normally constructed as a dialogue. There are dozens of different *pastourelles* in the Coirault catalogue but a fairly standard development is for the monsieur to announce his passion, only to have it rejected. The rejection might be accompanied with a comparison between the monsieur and the woman’s preferred lover, the shepherd; such comparisons are also found in some siege songs such as those concerning Namur and Lille mentioned above. The monsieur then attempts to force his ardent affections on her: the story can end in different ways, either with the shepherdess succumbing (perhaps for money), or playing a trick on the monsieur, or threatening violence in her turn. The monsieur might go away disappointed, but not always. For the women who sang these songs—and they appear mostly to have been sung by women—they may have functioned as a way of thinking through strategies to deal with unwanted advances, disclaiming attractiveness, threatening retributory violence,

<sup>52</sup> N. Belmont, ‘The symbolic function of the wedding procession in the popular rituals of marriage’, in *Ritual, Religion and the Sacred*, ed. R. Forster and O. Ranum (Baltimore, 1982), 1–7.

<sup>53</sup> Rublack, ‘Wench and maiden’, 3.

<sup>54</sup> On the disputed origins of this genre, plebeian or elite: L. Spetia, ‘The pastourelle as a popular genre’, in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. K. Reichl (Berlin, 2011), 581–600.

<sup>55</sup> J.-M. Garnier, *Histoire de l’imagerie populaire et des cartes à jouer à Chartres* (Chartres, 1869), 414.

demanding compensation, while all the time accepting that none of them may work.

A key element in the *pastourelle* was the social distance between the two participants in the dialogue, clearly signalled by the fact that the monsieur addresses his would-be conquest in the second person singular, whereas the shepherdess uses the more polite second person plural. To illustrate the point, I quote the first two verses of 'La Belle Ysabeau' (Coirault 4308), sung by Cécile Compaing, a tiler's wife from l'Age-Boutrie d'Adriers, to her brother-in-law, the song collector Léon Pineau. She also sang a version of song type 7001, in her case about 'La ville de Moscou'.

'Je viens t'y voir, ma chère Isabeau,/ Je viens t'y voir dans ces  
printemps nouveaux,/ Je viens t'y voir pour amourette,/ Je viens t'y  
voir dans ces beaux lieux,/ Pour y plaire à tes yeux,/ Ma mignonne,  
si tu veux,/ Au rang des amoureux.'  
'Monsieur, cessez vos compliments,/ Car vous perdez tout votre  
temps./ Je suis bergère,/ Je suis grossière,/ Je suis bergère, en  
vérité,/ Sans esprit, sans beauté,/ Sans l'avoir mérité,/ Monsieur,  
sans vos amitiés.'<sup>56</sup>

The same pattern, in which the besieging claims social ascendancy over the city simply through his mode of address, also characterizes some siege songs. The parallel is obvious, for example, in the song which citizen Leveau (dit Beauchant), a well-known Parisian street singer, claimed to have composed about Napoleon's siege and possession of Mantua, published in 1797.<sup>57</sup> Leveau had recently styled himself the 'chanteur des menus-plaisirs des sans-culottes' but previously he had been an equally enthusiastic celebrator of the Bourbons, as later he would be of the imperial regime.<sup>58</sup> And the song was not really composed by him, rather it was a retread of an ancien régime siege song. The first two verses of his dialogue between the general and the city follow the pattern of a *pastourelle*:

'Je te salue, Mantoue, belle ville charmante,/ Pour toi j'ai le cœur  
plein d'amour;/ Donne-moi tes faveurs, tu seras mon amante./ Je  
te payerai de retour;/ Parcourant toute l'Italie/ Avec mes généreux  
guerriers,/ Ces défenseurs de la patrie,/ Ils sont tous couverts de  
lauriers;/ La Liberté seule nous charme,/ Nous ne voulons pas  
d'autre sort,/ Nous avons tous jurés par nos armes,/ à tous les tyrans  
guerre à mort.'  
'Non, cela n'est pas croyable,/ Je défendrai mes remparts:/ Je veux  
rester immuable,/ Mes soldats sont des Césars:/ Pour me défendre/

<sup>56</sup> L. Pineau, *Le Folk-lore du Poitou* (Paris, 1892), 241–2.

<sup>57</sup> *Recueil de chansons sur les préliminaires de la Paix, composées et chantées par LEVEAU, dit BEAUCHANT, et la Citoyenne CHESNE, sa fille, et par tous les chanteurs de la société* (Paris, n.d.), 9–11.

<sup>58</sup> Coirault, *Formation de nos chansons folkloriques*, i. 108–17.

J'ai de nombreux bataillons,/ Et de bonnes munitions/ A discrétion,  
pour vous attendre.'

A distinctive feature of 'Le Bombardement de Mantoue', compared with Leveau's composition on the same subject as well as other siege songs and the *pastourelles* they resemble, is that, often, the social positions are reversed. It is the city, and the ladies of the chateau, that use the informal 'tu' while the general addresses the female city as 'vous'. In Cécile Compaing's version of the 'La Ville de Moscou', for instance, Bonaparte sends three of his gendarmes who announce 'C'est Bonaparte qui nous envoie-t-ici,/ voir si vous voulez vous soumettre à lui!' But when the cannons start firing the ladies of Moscow climb the ramparts to plead 'O Bonaparte, apaise tes canons/ Contribution nous te ferons!'<sup>59</sup> This reversal gives an added edge to the song. It is not just about sexual conflict; it is about social conflict.

In dialogic songs it is not always certain with which character (if any) the singer identifies. In 'Le bombardement de Mantoue' there are at least five voices, the narrator, the general, his messengers, the city and the ladies. But one can usually hazard a guess as to the main character in a dialogic song based on who gets to speak last. For example, in 'La Belle Ysabeau', it the shepherdess who has the last word, which she uses to dismiss the monsieur: 'adieu trompeur, grand cajôleur!' This is her song, she gets to deliver its message, which is also the singer Cécile Compaing's message. In 'Le bombardement de Mantoue' it is almost always the general who speaks last, either rejecting the ladies' offer to pay contribution or exhorting his own troops to kill and pillage all. This is his song, but also at some level the singer's, which is why, although we are talking about a king or Bonaparte, he appears in the song as a social inferior. This is a song about sexual possession but also about social revenge, which may help explain why it was as popular among women as among men.

And for this purpose, siege songs are ideal because they allow another element in French rural popular culture to come to the fore—hostility to the town and its inhabitants. This is a less marked feature in French folk song than one might expect, given the importance attached to this cleavage by many historians, but there were occasions when anti-urban emotions could be mobilized in the countryside for political ends. According to Yves-Marie Bercé, early modern peasant revolts in France followed a pattern: the mustering of the communes, their assembly on the 'plat-pays', the march to the town behind whose walls sheltered their enemies—landowners, absentee nobles, tax collectors, lawyers and government officials—which was placed in a state of siege. Should the revolt prove successful, the peasant army would take possession of the town in a show of festive violence which mimicked the ceremonial entries of monarchs, governors and bishops.<sup>60</sup> Some of these assaults were

<sup>59</sup> Pineau, *Le Folk-lore du Poitou*, 379–80.

<sup>60</sup> Y.-M. Bercé, *Histoire des croquants*, ii, 694–6.

commemorated by songs which endured in local folk culture, such as Breton song 'Potred Plouiaou' [The Lads of Plouyé] about the capture of Quimper in 1490, recorded in the 1840s, or Vosgian 'Le Chant de Rosemont' [The Song of Rosemont] about an attack on Belfort in 1525, recorded in 1853.<sup>61</sup> This pattern of triumphal processions, pillages and destruction—which sometimes seems like a deliberate parody of military sieges and sacks, and at others an attempt by rebels to claim the protection of the 'customs of war'—was a feature of the civil war in the West in 1793 which were, according to Paul Bois, motivated by countrymen's hatred for the 'bourgeois' or townsfolk.<sup>62</sup> One can still hear the peasant/urbanite antagonism in the imagined dialogue between the royalist general Charette and the ladies of Montaigu: 'De vos dix millions je ne m'en souci guère,/ Nous tuerons tout, les petits et les grands,/ Nous aurons l'or, aussi l'argent'.<sup>63</sup>

The capture of Montaigu was followed by violence, including the killing of surrendered soldiers and national guardsmen. But it was not the generalized massacre promised in the song. Of course, had Charette made good on the threat ascribed to him in folk culture, no distinction would have been made between the inferior and superior in social terms, which perhaps undercuts a social interpretation of the song. But at this point it is worth recalling the comment of the Swiss street singer La Dentelle: 'it was a bad thing to pillage "les petits"!'<sup>64</sup> He did not say it was wrong to pillage 'les grands'.

## V

Immediately after recording his father's and uncle's performance of this song, Nadaud explained, in a slightly obscure line, that 'my father, by furnishing my imagination with all these military feats, believed he made his son into a Bonapartist, and immediately after the revolution of 1830 he thus became a Republican'.<sup>65</sup> His father's song helped to frame his historical and political comprehension of the world and his own place in it, yet the lesson he took was rather different from the one the performer originally intended. As this example suggests, songs are complex communicative acts. The text of an orally delivered song such as 'Le bombardement de Mantoue' appears simple, reductive even, but that does not mean that it is equally simple to deduce its meaning. Any one performance of the song relies on a tradition of multiple

<sup>61</sup> D. Laurent and M. Nassiet, 'Songs as echoes of rebellion in early modern Brittany', and G. Bischoff, 'Remembering the Peasants' War in the Vosges: the song of Rosemont', in *Rhythms of Revolt: European Traditions and Memories of Social Conflict in Oral Culture*, ed. É. Guillorel, D. Hopkin and W. G. Pooley (Abingdon, 2018).

<sup>62</sup> P. Bois, *Paysans de l'ouest: des structures économiques et sociales aux options politiques depuis l'époque révolutionnaire dans la Sarthe* (Paris, 1971 [1960]), 294–302.

<sup>63</sup> A. Guéraud and J. Le Floch, *En Bretagne et Poitou: chants populaires du comté nantais et du bas-Poitou* (Saint-Jouin-De-Milly, 1995), i. 102. Guérard collected several variants of this counter-revolutionary version of Coirault 7001 in the 1850s and 60s.

<sup>64</sup> Rossat, 'Vieilles chansons de France recueillies dans le Jura bernois', 161.

<sup>65</sup> Nadaud, *Mémoires de Léonard*, 53.

performances stretching back in time; each performance might be different, altering aspects of the text, the tune, the tone or the rhythm to affect the communicative act, turning triumph into tragedy, or transforming a historical claim into an interpersonal dialogue. To understand its messages, the intended audience drew on their knowledge not just of this one song and the other performances they had witnessed, but also of its relationship to other songs, and the symbols and metaphors which underlie verbal artistry in oral cultures. And even then, the song could be versatile, meaning different things to different performers and their listeners, simultaneously even. Opacity and multivalency are key markers of orality. Nadaud's inability to articulate exactly what message was conveyed in his father's song illustrates this process.

Songs also, through metaphor, harmonized ideas which were not necessarily correlated, such as a political and sexual identity. Nadaud came to identify with both the French nation and 'le peuple'—the people in the sense of the commoners, the socially inferior—through songs like this. He also intuited that to be a French republican meant knowing who your enemies were and to be willing to offer violence to them, whether they be Austrians, aristocrats or women. Several facets of French Republicanism—nationalist ideology, social levelling and the imposition of male superiority—could be accommodated within the same song and experienced as congruent. These were not so much lessons learnt as felt: in the words of another working-class autobiographer, through listening to his family's songs, 'one entered through the poorman's gate into the world of beauty ... one discovered this world, one created it, starting with oneself'. A song seemed to contain 'all the truth of mankind and all the harmony of the universe'.<sup>66</sup> For Nadaud, entering this transcendent world through song—where contradictions and problems were resolved—was an important step in his self-fashioning.

<sup>66</sup> J. Guéhenno, *Changer la vie: mon enfance et ma jeunesse* (Paris, 1961), 118–20.