

CHAPTER 8

THE ROMANCE OF ENGLAND:
RICHARD COER DE LYON, SARACENS, JEWS,
AND THE POLITICS OF RACE AND NATION*

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This chapter examines how popular romance organizes the emergence of the medieval nation, by manipulating racializing discourses through the circuit of an aggressive, cannibalistic joke.

It took considerable efforts of distortion to shape both the land and the people into a vision of a single community.

—Thorlac Turville-Petre, England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290–1340

At the heart of one version of the thirteenth/fourteenth/fifteenth century romance, Richard Coer de Lyon (RCL)—whose Middle English texts recount, in romance mode, the putative history of the Third Crusade of Latin Christendom against the Islamic empire of Saladin in the Levant—is a spectacular story of cannibalism performed by the king of England, Richard I. During his siege of the Muslim-occupied city of Acre, the story goes, Richard falls ill from the travails of his sea journey to Syria, the unnatural cold and heat of the local climate, and the unsuitable "mete and drynk" that his body endures on campaign (3043–48). Richard's illness is historically documented; but what follows as cure is purest romance.
In his malady, Richard yearns for pork—animal flesh, I have suggested elsewhere, that in medieval culture symbolically distinguishes Christians from Muslims, who are prohibited by religious orthodoxy from the consumption of swine’s flesh. Since they are in Syria, Richard’s men discover no pork anywhere to be had, but an “old kny3” fashions an ingenious substitute: at the knight’s detailed instructions and unbeknownst to Richard, the steward has a young, fat Saracen killed, opened up, and fielded; boiled with saffron and other spices, the freshly killed corpse is turned into a broth for the king’s delectation. The dish is simultaneously offered as a tempting delicacy to lure back the king’s appetite and for the food’s special curative, medicinal properties; once supped, the king will sleep and sweat off his fever and awakens restored, whole again (3077–3102). Not only does the planned cure perform with remarkable success, but Richard devours his meal with greedy relish, eating faster than his carver is able to carve the human flesh for him (3110), gnawing at the bones of his Saracen victim, and washing the whole down with plentiful drink (3111–12). Richard’s folk are delighted at their kindly, healthful, and private joke at the King’s expense—“His people turned themselves away and laugh” [Hys folk hem tourned away and low3] (3114)—a collective prank that mightily restores the king’s vitality; and Richard’s people duly give thanks to “Jesus and Mary” for their help (3122–23).

Shortly after boisterously returning to skirmish with the Saracens, Richard demands all the “head of that same swine of which I ate” (3198–99), because he says, he feels faint and fears the return of his malady. The cook at first resists, but, threatened with the loss of his own head, returns on his knees with the black, grinning head of the dead (and eaten) Saracen, in a scene that triumphantly stages the horror of the head, its racial difference, and its inhuman, devilish nature. Narrative attention zeroes in on the black face and black beard of the detached head, set off against white teeth that are bared by widely grinning lips (3211–13). Richard’s response (“What devil is this?” 3214) is extravagant laughter. He had not known before, he exclaims, that Saracen flesh was so delicious; now his army would never lack for food, since they were able, in any assault, to slay Saracens and take their flesh to boil, roast, or bake, gnawing the flesh to the bones; never again would he and his men fear hunger in their campaign of conquest in the Levant (3216–3226).

What is extraordinary about this bizarre performance of cannibalism by a celebrated English king is less the cannibalism itself than the depiction of cannibalism as a joke in a popular romance—a joke that, like romance itself, has healing and aggressive properties; that is to say, a properly romantic kind of joke. Pointedly, the joke here is attached to a historical English king to announce and embellish, not to condemn, his legend: Richard I, one of the most admired of Christian warriors, crusaders, and medieval English monarchs, is a magnificent cannibal of a gloriously unapologetic, aggressive kind. The selection of Richard is an inspired decision: among medieval kings, Richard’s personal magnetism, his aura as a crusading leader of Christendom, and his legend as a military genius, are unmatched. Richard is the ideal symbol to figure a magnitude of cultural drives pulsating through the long centuries of this romance’s formation: aggressive territorial ambitions, the consumption and discipline of alien communities, and the nascent, overarching impulse toward the formation of the medieval nation.

The Thirteenth Century and Beyond: Nation and Romance in the Epistemic Crucible

The thirteenth century—the period in which RCL was first begun, according to the text’s editorial traditions—is not only that century in which inscriptions of medieval nationalism begin to call attention to themselves in a pronounced fashion in the cultural documents of England. I will argue, here, that the thirteenth century is an extraordinary period in medieval history that positions an epistemic break, and witnesses the rise of a new epistemic formation in medieval culture: a formation in which institutions of control are innovatively expanded, intensified, and refined through instruments of inquisition, regulation, and discipline that continue through the later centuries of the Middle Ages. A symbolic moment of this new epistemology is constituted by the Fourth Lateran Council under the presiding genius of Pope Innocent III in 1215, a council that generated seventy canons—more than double the number issued by any of the three previous Laterans of the preceding century, and more than triple those of Lateran I—and representing a massive codification of rules on a vast array of subjects. There are canons setting out the doctrinal basis upon which heresy would henceforth be relentlessly prosecuted; canons mandating and schematizing the internal examination of the individual Christian through confession (after Lateran IV, it is often noted, confessional manuals proliferate); canons governing marriage, excommunication, and the sacraments; canons instructing on the payment of tithes and taxes and the making of contracts; canons detailing the governance of clergy and clerical conduct, benefices, and parishes; even canons specifying conditions of appearance, dress, and distinguishing badges for racial and religious minorities living throughout Christendom.

If Lateran IV furnished the ideological basis for disciplining the individual by searching out the secrets of conscience hidden within the body, the thirteenth century also infamously witnessed the rise and proliferation
of another panoptic institution aimed at viewing, examining, and controlling the insides of persons: the inquisition, whose methods of interrogation scrutinized the interior, even as its methods of evidence disciplined the exterior by mapping the body's extensive geographies of pain. Close attention to the human microcosm was paired with concomitant attention to the macrocosm of Christendom-at-large. The early century saw an ominous expansion of the uses of the crusade—that military arm of Latin Christendom, comprising the combined might and armies of Europe—at institution originally designed by Pope Urban II a century before to pull together centrifugal forces in the congregatio fidelium. In the thirteenth century the crusade was the first time turned against internal members of the congregatio fidelium itself: in 1204 the Fourth Crusade captured and eviscerated Constantinople, occupying Greek Christian territory for more than half a century afterward, and irreparably destroying thereafter the capacity of Eastern Christianity to continue in its centuries-long role as a bulwark against Islam in the Mediterranean; from 1208 to 1229 the bloody, relentless persecution and massacre of Albigensians in southern France under the rubric of crusade was inaugurated. Just as the thirteenth century witnessed the church's campaign against so-called schismatics and heretics crystallize in doctrinally and militarily innovative ways, it also witnessed efforts to contain and limit potential deviance by extending the umbra of the church, as the rise of the mendicant orders in the first half of the century attests. The mendicants—a mobile, spiritual army of friars-at-large, undertaking the new, as well as older, religious duties—function, then, as a missionary presence of the church in the field and an essential component of enforcement and ideological reproduction. Answering directly to the pope, the orders supplied the ranks of papal inquisitors admirably; unlike older dispensations, their mobility in ferreting out heresy and heretics everywhere meant efficient deployment to new tasks. In philosophy and cultural work, the impulse toward containment, assimilation, and regulation finds the century engaged in producing summae—vast compendia of knowledge aggregately systematized; refining the procedures, interrogatory methods, and evidential system of scholasticism; and assaying encyclopedias-like literary compilations, such as the interminable Old French Vulgate cycle of prose Arthurian romances.

It is not a coincidence, then, that a century that saw interiors turned inside out for inspection, and internal partitionings and divisions enacted in Christendom (a logical if ironic consequence of the church's will-to-power and centralizing initiatives) should also witness a fractionalizing, partitioning drive at work in the European polity that powered nascent nationalism. The rise of medieval nationalism in the crucible of epistemic change is not, I argue, merely conjunctural or accidental. In the thirteenth
century, nationalism in England has at hand examples, ideas, agents, and instrumentailities only vestigially (if at all) available earlier. Among the regimes that develop in the episteme of the thirteenth century and after, I contend, is a racializing discourse posited on religion, color, and bodily difference, the intense and searching examination of which—close attention to distinguishing details that putatively mark off essences—sets the later Middle Ages apart from the earlier Middle Ages. Although part of a transformational grammar of race that extends beyond the Middle Ages, the emergence of a distinctive racializing discourse in the later medieval period specifically attests the instrumentality of racialized categories in the formation of a medieval nation. That nation is not, of course, a modern state: among the distinguishing properties of the medieval nation—always a community of the realm, communitas regni—is the symbolizing potential of the king, whose figurative status allows leveling discourses and an expressive vocabulary of unity, cohesion, and stability to be imagined, in a language functioning as the linguistic equivalent of the nation's incipient modernity.

My discussion of RCL as an exemplar of nationalist romance in England from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries thus has a number of moments. I begin from the critical commonplace that war, in medieval history as in medieval romance, is a productive channel for nationalism; and religious war—the crusade—is the productive channel for a nationalism that, in the Middle Ages, is always and fundamentally traversed, determined, and articulated by religious investments: a specificity of medieval nationalism. My discussion of a racializing discourse in England that answers to the interests of nation-formation thus follows the example of RCL by always reading racial difference, including depictions of skin color and bodily markers, as intersecting with religious difference: with Islam and Judaism. My selection of an English romance contends, moreover, that the use of English in medieval England is a bid for a linguistic modernity and a linguistic nationalism that parallels and articulates the rise of the medieval nation. Finally, the choice of a popular romance as an exemplar—RCL survives in seven manuscripts and two printed editions, and its narrative is traversed by utopian fictions of class unity and justice—imitates the work of popular literary productions, and popular romances, in particular, in the discursive work of imagining the nation. For it is in popular, not chivalric, romance that the impetus toward nation formation can be readily read: chivalric productions being, above all, the ideological property of elites whose class interests are typically overarching, and whose class culture constitutes chivalry as an international formation whose loyalties exceed the merely local or national. Although popular romance utilizes conventions and topos made conveniently familiar to all audiences by
older modalities of romance, the determinations of popular romance, I suggest, lie elsewhere, and allow the channeling of broader, deeper, and new national currents, forms of address, and experimentation.

**Black Humor, or the Color Politics of a Cannibalistic Joke: Nationalism, Colonization, History**

A joke that works best to be told more than once, and the romance of Richard/England shows what can be gained when a successful joke is crafted to be repeated. With Richard’s delighted discovery that Muslims can simultaneously be conquered and eaten in military assault (3220–25)—territorial digestion felicitously accompanying alimentary digestion—a second episode of cannibalism naturally follows. This second cannibalism is designed as a diplomatic exercise, carefully staged to bring home the full, intimidating power of Christian military—gustatory aggression to Saladin’s aged, aristocratic ambassadors. Richard invites the ambassadors to a state dinner. As the meal’s first course, Richard, who happens to have in captivity the sons of the kings of Niniveh, Persia, Samaria, Egypt, and Africa (3599–3603), has these scions beheaded, and their shaven and plucked, cooked heads are set before the Saracen diners who are their kinmen. Each head arrives on a platter, piping hot, and is arranged so that the face looks upward, with bared, grinning teeth like before, and bears the name of the decapitated prince and his lineage labeled on its brow (3428–30)—every dish being set between two diners, in the grand style of royal and state dinners in medieval literature and history. As the horrified relatives weep over the beardless, hairless heads of their slain family members (3466) and grow terrified for their lives, Richard’s own dish of Saracen’s head, complete with label, is served up for him by the royal carver; and, before the horrified eyes of all, Richard the Lionheart devours the flesh with “herte good” (3481)—with a hearty, lion-size appetite. Lest the meaning of this sublimely diabolical performance be lost on the beholder, Richard commands the ambassadors to return to their master, Saladin, with the message that he and his men plan to eat every living Saracen in Saladin’s lands, and will not return again to England until every Muslim inhabitant has been eaten (3555–62).

This time around the king of England emphasizes to the Muslim dignitaries that his gustatory practices are not unique to himself, but will be the routine, identifying practice of a generalized commonality of peoples. Englishmen. To an English Christian subject, Richard announces, there is no flesh so nourishing as the flesh of a Saracen (“per is no fleisch so no-rysschaunt / Vnto an Ynglyssche Cristen-man ... As pe fleisch of a Sarazyn,” 3548–52): in fact, what defines the Englishman—the national subject—is his delight in eating up the natives in his march of conquest into foreign—international—territory. As Richard gleefully mimes that foreign aggression through a cannibalistic joke, he thus perceptibly conjures up a national collectivity of souls, materializes a unity of Christian Englishmen. The joke, meanwhile, taps conventions of humor that make the transgression of taboos acceptable, narratable: Richard’s barbarism in territorial and gustatory arenas can be overlooked, even admired, in the English king’s skilful manipulation of a joke’s trajectory in overpowering limits of permission, in the push for the punchline; so that the aggressive, nationalistic pleasure can be enjoyed with the full approval of conscience. (It’s only a joke, after all.) The meaning of Richard’s gory joke is not, of course, lost on the greybeard ambassadors, whose powerlessness and feebleness are silently echoed in the demasculated, plucked heads of their murdered kinmen. In their subsequent report to Saladin—a report that, in a double narration, performatively keeps the shocking scene before our eyes after the actual event has passed—the ambassadors speak directly to the territorial implications of a commensalized English, Christian nationalism—cannibalism: now that Richard has won Acre, they urge, he means to go forth to conquer lands east, west, south, and north—the entire Islamic world—and eat their children and themselves (3666–69). In devouring the heirs of Muslim kings and princes of the Orient (3656–61), English Christians will swallow up lineages and sweep away succession, consuming the future itself, in world domination.

A nationalistic joke, of course, is ideal for expressing international aggression, since aggression is precisely the point of its humor. A joke, as Freud once pointed out, cannily taps sources of aggressive pleasure when directed against others; a collective joke, moreover, bribes an audience “into taking sides ... without any very close investigation” and works to draw “the laughs” over to one’s side (“die Lacher auf seine Seite ziehen”), instantly uniting the collectivity of those who laugh and share the joke.6 Thanks to the circuit of the joke in this romance, nationalist and colonial ambitions are exemplified as continuous—logically partnered with each other in the discourse of war and power. In service to the community of those who would laugh, and share the joke, Richard’s act superbly demonstrates ideological mastery by deftly turning an originally affectionate joke against the king, in the first cannibalism, into a collective hostile joke against the enemy, in the second cannibalism: extrapolating, in the process, a community called “England,” made up of “good,” “English,” “Christian men” who are defined by their appetite for Muslims. Before that moment where the collectivity of Englishmen is magically constituted in Richard’s speech, however, another defining instant is first necessary: a key genetic recognition when what is not, and can never
the famed English crusader-king in 1189 occasioned a slaughter of Jews at Westminster and London that spread to Lynn in Norfolk, Norwich, Stamford, and York—events celebrated by some twelfth century chroniclers with as much relish as the slaughter of that other infidel enemy in Richard’s campaigns. 10

The political implications of the medieval capacity to think analogically are starkly visible in persecutory movements in which the targets of violence shift, spread, and stretch across a spectrum of nonidentical communities. David Nirenberg’s discussion of the Shepherds’ and Cowherds’ crusades of 1320–21 shows how violence detours beyond its initial targets to absorb other targets and communities, finally subsuming Muslims, Jews, lepers, practitioners of sorcery, whose uniqueness and nonidentity are easily bridged by habits of analogical thinking that catch at the underlying resemblance of these targets by virtue of the targets’ alterity, their difference from cultural normativity: a thinking that enables targets to shift, substitute, and stand in for another. 11 We should not be surprised, then, to find Muslims acting strangely like Jews in RCL. The historical anti-Jewish libel of well poisoning, a libel that takes root in Chinson in 1320–21 and infamously recurs in Europe during the Black Death, is attributed here to Saladin, as if Jews and Muslims were identical:

He leet taken all be cors,
Bope off dede men, and off hors,
And caste into be watry off oure welle
Vs to poysoun and to quelle;
Dede he neuerre a wers dede
To Creyste-men for no nede.
For borwys bat poysoyn, and thate breche,
Floury toounds toke her dethe. (2749–56)

This depiction of Muslims as virtual Jews in the calumny of well poisoning is part of RCL’s narrative from at least the earliest surviving manuscript of the text, the fragment in the Auchinleck, dated circa 1330—about a generation after the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290, and the nearly simultaneous loss of the last crusader colony, Acre, to Muslims in 1291. Significantly, although awash with Saracens, RCL is ignorant about medieval Muslims and their religion: Islam is not a monotheism prohibiting deistic representation; rather, Saracen idols, gods, and temples abound; “heathen” and “pagan” are interchangeable synonyms; and the Islamic “gods”—Mahoun (Mohammad), Termagant, Appolyn (Apollo), Jupiter—are mere conventions familiarized by the chansons de geste. Richard, a home-grown hero, resembles the Richard of
medieval chronicles, but Saladin is a mere *chanson* villain. If this romance written in England is unfamiliar with the foreign enemies of Christendom it describes in Outremer, what other enemies of Christendom might it be more familiar with, closer to home in England, who might come to mind in conceiving threats to *communitas Christiana* and English interests?

Despite the early Augustinian tradition of relative tolerance toward Jews in Christian communities, protections occasionally extended by pope, ecclesiast, and emperor, Christian polemists from the twelfth century on increasingly accumulated arguments that positioned Jewish institutions, traditions, and practices as cornerstones upon which the consolidation of Christian doctrine and principles might be established. The rhetorical strategies of Odo of Cambrai, Guibert of Nogent, Rupert of Deutz, Petrus Alphonsi, Peter Abelard, and Peter the Venerable variously represented Jews as the antithesis of Christians, depicting Jewish rejection of the Incarnation as evidence of a literalness—an incapacity for allegorical and metaphorical thinking—that rendered the Jew subhuman, animal-like, through a lack in the faculty of reason (Abulafia). In the thirteenth century, the ideological reduction of Jews to animality found hideous expression in the *Judensau*, the conflation of Jews with swine, tabooed animals in Judaism as much as Islam, in “portraits of Jews sucking at the teats of a sow.” Also from the thirteenth century come confused blood libels against Jewish communities—the calumny that Jews murdered Christians, especially children, because Christian blood was consumed in Passover rituals—a thinly disguised accusation of vampiric cannibalism. A period of special epistemic virulence toward Jews, the thirteenth century issued the libel of Jewish Host-desecration—a libel that freshened the old tradition that Jews were the killers of Christ, by insinuating that Christ’s deicide at Jewish hands was not only conscious, but repeated *post mortem* through Jewish torture and destruction of the Eucharist. A twelfth-century polemict like Rupert of Deutz may have considered Jews rather than Muslims the antithesis of Christians, but the thirteenth century witnessed the consolidation of Jews as the standard by which contempt for enemies could be measured and fittingly expressed: Robert de Clari’s chronicle on the Fourth Crusade’s annexion of Constantinople reports that the bishops of Soissons, Troyes, and Haldenstadt and the abbot of Loos vindicated Latin Christendom’s attack on Greek Christendom as righteous by decisively dismissing the Byzantine victims as “worse than Jews.”

In the new episteme, then, *RCL’s* two cannibalisms seem to serve up a special kind of punishment, and English Christendom’s communal narration on what kind of justice Jews, as much as Saracens, deserve. For the killers of Christ who cannibalistically require Christian blood, what better desert could there be than the answer of Semitic heads on a platter, to be cannibalistically consumed in turn by Christian Englishmen? Moreover, the covert, second meaning of the cannibalistic scenes must be arrived at—can only be read—*allegorically*, since the decapitated heads in the foreground are ostensibly Saracen ones: through allegory, then, a race believed incapable of grasping allegory—their defining difference from Christians, who are expert exegetical readers and manipulators of biblical allegory—may be fittingly humiliated. The polemical equation of Jews with carnality, animal senses, and the body, and the *Judensau’s* copulation of Jews with swine make Richard’s desire for swine’s flesh, and his eating of humans as if they were animals, grotesquely meaningful. Even the image of the grinning maws of Richard’s victims has a counterpart in the *adversus Judaicorum* tradition: Guibert de Nogent, for example, counterposes a polemic around the “filthy gaping jaws” of the Jews, the “mouths which . . . mock the life-giving sacraments,” mouths that are forever closed by their tortuous passage through Richard’s purposeful joke.¹⁴

That Jews, as much as Muslims, are the targets in *RCL’s* two scenes of cannibalism is aided by medieval Christendom’s understanding that Jews collaborated with Muslims in Islamic invasions of Europe and Jerusalem. Oppressed Jews in Visigothic Spain were believed to have conspired with, invited, and assisted Arab and Berber invaders from the Mahrag against the Visigothic Catholic monarch, Roderick, in the second decade of the eighth century, a consequence of the fact that in Visigothic Spain after 589, Jews were persecuted, exiled, or forced to convert.¹⁵ Several thousand Jews were reputed to have fought alongside Abd-al Rahman and 10,000 Berbers against Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732. Closer to the crusades, “Adhemar of Chabannes (c. 1028) and the Cluniac Ralph Glaber (c. 1044) testify to the belief, widespread among the Christians of France, that the Jews were in league with the Muslims and that the destruction of the Holy Sepulchre in 1009 by the Fatimid caliph of Egypt, al-Hakim, was a product of a joint Islamo/Judaic conspiracy.”¹⁶ In Saladin’s time, the closeness between Muslims and Jews was suggestively expressed when the Turkish emperor, upon recapturing Jerusalem, brought in Jews to settle the holy city. The imagined co-identity of Christendom’s enemies is symbolically rendered in Lateran IV’s Canon 68, which assigns a distinction in clothing to mark off Jews and Saracens alike, collectively and together, from Christians, as if the two infidel nations were halves of a single body of aliens.

If the medieval ideological mind is able to confuse Jews with Muslims, *RCL*’s obsessive description of the forcible mass conversions of Saracens can be seen as more than just a simple fantasy. With seeming ahistoricity, *RCL* offers conversion as a major objective of crusader colonization: mass conversion follows the conquest of Nineveh (5370–71) and Babylon (5881–82); the crusaders demand conversion at Ebedy (4421–25); and in a
declaration of crusade policy, Richard orders Philip Augustus to put to the sword everyone he finds in “Toum, cytce, and castel” who will not convert (3821–28), an imperative Richard repeats to his own army (3965–70). In RCL, territorial annexation is synonymous with forcible conversion, and the alternative to conversion is death. History, by contrast, shows Muslim conversion to Christianity in the Levant as infrequent and sporadic: enough of a novelty for it to be noticed, commented on, and recorded when it happened, and overwhelmingly dictated by the self-interest or faith of each individual.18 Indeed, medieval history shows that it is Jews in Europe who are forced to undergo conversion, or suffer death at the hands of Christians, more than Muslims in the Holy Land: forcible conversion or death is a choice repeatedly offered to Jews in medieval England, France, Spain, and Germany. In playing thus with historical conditions that seem to vanish in medieval romance only to reappear, transformed, RCL hints at a curious parallel when it elects to articulate its theme of (Muslim) conversion with its theme of territorial dispossession and repose in the Holy Land. For not only are Jews the most prominent alien community in England denied ownership of land in fee while subject to periodic eruptions of forcible conversion or death, but an accident of economic history also made landless English Jews “the vehicle” and visible medium for the transfer of land ownership in England of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—and thus a figure of territorial dispossession and repose in the home country of this romance.19

RCL’s spectacles of conversion also eloquently speak to a history of conversion enacted in the English homeland. While inducements to convert to Christianity were sporadic in twelfth-century England—typically the spillovers of mob violence—in the thirteenth century, under repeated papal and ecclesiastical pressures, the discourse of conversion systematized into formal institutions of recruitment that received the endorsement of English kings; English kings even “began to confiscate Jewish synagogues and turn them into churches.” In 1232 Henry III formally established a “Domus Convertorum” for Jewish converts to Christianity, and baptisms of converted Jews were enacted before the king, “who took evident pleasure in naming the new converts.”30 Proselytization “was henceforth carried on more and more systematically”; by the 1240s and 1250s Jewish converts to Christianity “may have numbered as many as 300 in a total Jewish population that did not exceed 5,000 and that may have been as low as 3,000.”31 By 1280 Edward I required all Jews to attend conversionist sermons preached at them during Lent to turn them from Judaism, “in accordance with the Papal Bull Viteam Socr of the previous year.”32

The presence of a visible, economically active Jewish community in England living “check by jowl” with Christians33—a presence especially prominent in major cities like London and York, and in eastern and southeastern England—must have been troubling, because communal identity is defined not only against but also always in terms of the other. English Christians depended on Jews for the support of economic life, religious crusades, and transactions of knowledge, culture, and doctrinal theology. And unlike national rivals across the sea or ethnic antagonists sharing a border with the English polity—the French, Irish, Welsh, Scots—Jews constituted a prominent resident alien community within England itself, as England was consolidating as a nation; an alien community whose existence and daily activities were intimately bound up with the economic and social life of the dominant community but from which, nonetheless, it necessarily remained apart, by virtue of fundamental differences of race-religion. That the status of Jews is an obsessive target of attention for a medieval English society in transition, for English kings enlarging their fiscal and ideological resources, and for prelates consolidating Christian doctrine is attested to by the panoptic gaze witnessed in a series of ever-changing statutes, provisions, and obsessions that met at the locus of Jewish identity.

English economic dependence on Jewish mediation in finance, and the crown’s dependence on tallages levied on English Jewry (after Henry II dispensed with loans in favor of straightforward methods of fiscal extraction), meant that the association of Jews with profit drew as much inspective scrutiny as the threat of race-religion that Jews, as domestic aliens, were able to figure for the polity. Documents of debt to Jews and excitement over putative Jewish wealth featured prominently in anti-Jewish attacks, along with forced conversions. Not surprisingly, thus, profit and conversion are linked themes in RCL. Richard warns Philip Augustus not to accept bribes of “gold, sylluer” or any reward (3824) offered by desperate inidels; historically apt counsel to the king of France, since French Jewries may have escaped the conversions or deaths suffered by their coreligionists in the Rhineland in 1096 by buying off crusaders with large bribes. Richard’s own practices show how the fiscal resources of his vicitims could profit Christians, so that “Bail, baron, knight, commoner/Had as much as they wanted” (5891–92), a haunting reminder of how attacks against Jews in the wake of Richard’s ascension festivities in England also profited the Christian benefactors of violence, especially would-be, self-described crusaders. Roger of Howden tells of failed bribery, plunder, the killing of Jews, and the burning of records of debt to Jews at York; Roger of Wendover recounts the slaying of Jews at Norwich, Stamford, and St. Edmunds by crusaders, and plunder and the burning of debt papers at York; William of Newburgh describes plunder at Lynn, plunder and killing at Stamford by crusaders for the expenses of Richard’s crusade, and even
more massive plunder by crusaders for the same purpose at York, along with forcible and failed conversions and mass slaughters.24

Other foreign themes in RCL are also acted out by domestic subjects in English history. At RCL’s romance banquet, Saracen guests are conspicuously present, and princely Saracen victims are killed at Richard’s command. Historically, Jews were conspicuously required to be absent from Richard’s coronation banquet, although they were soon also killed, it is thought, by the king’s command. Two of the Jews persecuted at the time of the banquet and shortly after—Benedict and Jocess of York—are likened by medieval chroniclers to princes who live in near-regal luxury, in homes likened to palaces.25 Benedict was immortalized in chronicles as the Jew who was converted to Christianity during the attacks at Richard’s coronation, and who subsequently reconverted to Judaism.26 Benedict’s trajectory—from Judaism to Judaism, with a temporary detour through Christianity—thus queerly mirrors the trajectory of the renegade at Orgeous, in RCL, who proceeds from Christianity to Christianity, with a temporary detour through Islam (406ff, 4215-25). Even the labels on the Saracen heads at Richard’s banquet, functioning as badges of identity for the victims, seem queerly to reproduce the Jewish “badges of shame” that also proclaimed identity and filiation (and that, as specified by the Statue of Jewry of 1275 were as large as labels: six inches long by three inches wide).27 Finally, if the romance Richard treats his Saracen victims as if they were not fully and autonomously human, and little more than chattel, we note that the historical Richard, the king of England, possessed English Jews by right, customarily, from the time of Edward the Confessor on, as legally the property or chattel of the crown.

Although Canons 67 through 70 of Lateran IV furnished an ideological guide of general principles for containment, specifying conditions under which Jews were required to tender tithes, refrain from public appearance on certain days of Holy Week, be prohibited public office, and exhibit differences of dress from Christians, thirteenth-century England took the policing, marking, and scrutiny of Jewish activity and bodies to enthusiastic lengths. A scant three years after Lateran IV, English Jews had to wear that infamous badge which publicly marked off their difference. In 1222 the demand for Jewish self-identification was repeated at the Council of Oxford, which specified the size of the badge for Jews of both sexes. In 1225 Henry III ordered the badge to be worn in a prominent position on the breast, and in 1275 Edward’s Statutum de Judaeis increased the badges size, demanded that it be exhibited prominently over the heart, specified color, and ordered all Jewish children above the age of seven to display the badge. If a whiff of communal hysteria seems to touch the obsession over the size, color, placement, prominence, and universality of the Jewish badge, we understand that the manipulation of domestic minorities is a formative moment in the self-formation of national majorities. Knowing who and what a religious-racial minority is, is an essential stage in knowing who and what a national majority is, and is not the stable, legible categories of the one fiction enabling and stabilizing the categories of the other. Getting the lineaments of the two communities inhabiting the homeland fixed, visible, and clear is thus a project of some urgency, and in 1287 the Diocesan Synod of Exeter accordingly forbade Jews to employ Christian servants, hold public office, feast with Christians, attend Christians in the capacity of physicians, venture into churches, leave houses or even keep windows open at Easter tide, withhold tithes, or omit the wearing of the Jewish badge: prohibitions that ruminated on and ramified the prescriptive strictures of Lateran IV.28 Even as these prohibitions advertise the fears of religious authority, they also tellingly announce English Christian dependence on and intimacy with English Jews—a comingling in private and public life that disturbed the project of stable, known, and separate identities within England’s borders.29

The expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290 by Edward can thus be viewed as a social as well as an economic phenomenon. In economic terms, the expulsion has been rightly read as the culminating logic of a long process of systematic exactions that depleted the Jews’ financial resources, with profit accruing to the crown also from the expulsion. In social terms, the eviction is legible as part of a processional logic of national consolidation that occurred in thirteenth-century England, a logic that renders the inassimilable aliens who are too intimately interwoven into the life of the Christian communal body to be useful through the very process of their excision from that body. At least one scholar has demonstrated how the removal of the Jewish community in England—an inconveniently present “Israel of the flesh”—facilitated the substitution of the English themselves as the new chosen community of God—an “Israel of the spirit”—as an emerging nationalistic idea: a substitution that witnesses the cultural colonization of an old, familiar biblical topos for new, secular, and nationalist purposes, once Jews themselves, the old chosen people of God, were no longer present in the flesh to hinder imaginative reconfiguration in the nation’s interest.30 In the context of that cultural logic, the fate of the Domus Conversorum, home for converts from Judaism, seems highly symbolic, and even ironically inevitable. After the Jewish expulsion, in the last decade of the thirteenth century the Domus was converted into a residence for clerks of Chancery conducting government business; it then became, in the fourteenth century, the recognized center for Chancery business, called the ... Rolls House until the Public Record Office was built on the same site in 1845 and 1895.31
With eloquence, the home where once Jews were found became the site where the business of the new nation of England was recorded and kept, the official repository of England itself, once Jews were evicted from the national homeland: a potent symbol of the consolidation of the nation on the cornerstone of minority identity.

In English history, the alien infidels at home ultimately prove indigestible, and are expelled from England. In English romance, the alien infidels safely at a distance across the sea prove eminently digestible, and become a welcome part of the English diet of jokes, into which they are then incorporated. Romance, of course, is skilled at offering presence in the place of absence, a vocabulary for speaking difference differently, and for magical transformations: like the Domus Conversorum, romance is the perfect site for multiple conversions, in the making of a nation.

A Matter of England:
Nation, Christendom, Language,
"Class," and Other Romance Matters

Against contemporary theorization in the Western academy that locates the emergence of nations and nationalism in modern, postmedieval periods of history—usually the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—medievalists have struggled in recent years to outline specifically medieval forms of the nation, and of national feeling and identification, even arguing for the rise of the nation-state and statism during the European Middle Ages itself. Although the arguments are multifarious and undeniably en pointe, a consensus has emerged that discourses of the nation in the medieval period, like nationalist discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, hinge on Ben Anderson's formulation of the nation as an "imagined (political) community" while departing in other details—cultural, social, political, economic—from nationalist formations in postmedieval centuries. Key to the notion of an imagined community, medievalist scholarship decides, is self-identification by a national grouping, especially in defining one's national community against large communities of others in oppositional confrontations over territory, political jurisdiction, and dominion, and in warfare. Part of that self-identification involves a recognizably national form of address perceptible in the literary, historical, and cultural documents of a country at various stages of medieval nationalist discourse. Equally distinctive is the production of a symbolic system that uniquely signals and presents a nation as occupying different cultural and symbolic space from others within transnational groupings such as Western Christendom. Finally, the role of language, geographical boundedness, and ideologies of solidarity that cut across competing, antagonistic inter-

est among the social and economic groups in feudal society are indispensable components of the nation-in-progress.

Medievalists agree that from the thirteenth century onward, discourses of the nation are visible and can be read with ease in medieval England, aided by the boundedness of insular geography and despite (or because of) holdings in France by the English monarch and barony and England's annexations of territorially contiguous neighbors. Indeed, chronicler histories display a nascent sense of an "English" identity among Anglo-Normans from the end of the twelfth century—or even, as John Gillingham has argued, from as early as the mid-twelfth century. English military confrontations with the Welsh, Irish, Scots, and French in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—when "English power was institutionalised in Wales and Ireland"—deepened an emerging national community's projection of its difference from its contingent enemies: we are reminded that "the Magna Carta revolt as it appears from an English perspective, was also a war of . . . the French, the Welsh, and the Scots against the English—and so perceived at the time," while Henry III's struggles against Louis VIII of France "polarized the difference between English and French interests and encouraged a sense of apartness on both sides of the Channel." For Matthew Paris, the great nationalist historian, the struggles between England and France in the early thirteenth century assumption the proportions of a contest between nations; it is he who, in the thirteenth century, renders England as a territorially distinct and bounded political and symbolic entity in his detailed maps of England, which produce the nation as a mappable collectivity with a known geography, occupying a distinctive, separate space of its own. Despite the truism that "The nation . . . is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined," the medieval cartographer's projection of a geopolitical category—territorial space coincident with the name of the nation, uniquely shaped and set off—is a powerful performative moment, a moment that enacts and points to the performativity of nationalist discourse, and the power of such discourse to bring nations into being: "a dry, rancorous political fact" of national history is that "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; [nationalism] invents nations where they do not exist." By the late thirteenth century, the anonymous author of the Cursor Mundi easily names "Ingland the nacione" and specifies the "Englis tong" as a unifying "specie" possessed by "enlijs men in commune."

In the fourteenth century, Edward III's assertion of sovereignty over France and his claim to the French throne over the Valois monarch's—the pretext that inaugurates the so-called Anglo-French war of a hundred years—merely brings to dramatic culmination, then, a long process of