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‘That country beyond the Humber’: The
English North, Regionalism, and the Negotiation of Nation in
Medieval English Literature

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in Medieval English Literature

by

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For Laura

Poi le vidi in un carro trïumfale,
Laurëa mia con suoi santi atti schifi
sedersi in parte, et cantar dolcemente.

(Petrarch, *Canzoniere* CCXXV)

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‘That country beyond the Humber’: The
English North, Regionalism, and the Negotiation of Nation in Medieval English
Literature

William Joseph Taylor, Ph.D.

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My dissertation examines the presence of the “North of England” in medieval texts, a presence that complicates the recent work of critics who focus upon an emergent nationalism in the Middle Ages. Far removed from the ideological center of the realm in London and derided as a backwards frontier, the North nevertheless maintains a distinctly generative intimacy within the larger realm as the seat of English history—the home of the monk Bede, the “Father of English History”—and as a frontline of defense against Scottish invasion. This often convoluted dynamic of intimacy, I assert, is played out in those literary conversations in which the South derides the North and *vice versa*—in, for example, the curt admonition of one shepherd that the sheep-stealer Mak in the Wakefield Master’s *Second Shepherd’s Play* stop speaking in a southern tongue: that he “take out his southern tooth and insert a turd.”

The North functioned as a contested geography, a literary character, and a spectral presence in the negotiation of a national identity in both canonical and non-canonical texts including Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, William of Malmesbury's Latin histories, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and the Robin Hood ballads of the late Middle Ages. We see this contest, further, in the medieval universities wherein students segregated by their "nacion," northern or southern, engaged in bloody clashes that, while local, nevertheless resonated at the national level. I argue that the outlying North actually operates as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the processes of imagining nation; that regionalism is both contained within and constitutive of its apparent opposite, nationalism. My longue durée historicist approach to texts concerned with the North—either through narrative setting, character, author or textual provenance—ultimately uncovers the emerging dialectic of region and nation within the medieval North-South divide and reveals how England's nationalist impulse found its greatest expression when it was threatened from within by the uncanny figure of the North.

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Introduction

“The Furthest Corner of the World”: Region and Nation in the North-South Divide¹

On February 16, 2009 the London charity and art organization Poetry in the City held an event for which local poets read original poems on the English North-South divide. In response to the BBC’s coverage of the event, novice poets from the public at-large generated their own North-South musings.² Jan Church of Winchester, reflects on the North:

Land of rocks, Of peaks and pikes,
Fleetwith, Langdale, Scafell,
Of edges: Alderley,
Striding, Stanage, Robin Hoods, Froggatt.
And wizards.

¹ “extremo natus orbis angulo.” William comments here on Bede’s origins in the North of England. Though he seems here to intimate that Britain is the “furthest corner” the North as “its most distant region” becomes, then, the absolute ends of the world. William of Malmesbury, *Gestum Regum Anglorum*, ed. R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom R.A.B. Mynors, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford Universtiy Press, 1998), 82-83.

² For examples of the poems, see “The North-South Divide in Verse,” *BBC News Magazine Online* (February 16, 2009), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7892644.stm/ (accessed October 22, 2009).

The green knight with hair bristling,
The wizard asleep by the Iron Gates,
The wizard Earl of Northumberland
And yet further
The high hills of the Cheviot
With curlews calling.

Church links the geological to the mythological at Alderly Edge in Cheshire East, where one encounters the “wizard asleep at the Iron Gates.” So the legend goes, the gates lead to a cavernous sanctuary in which sleeps a great army—in many versions of the myth, an army of Arthur’s knights—that will one day ride out to save Britain in battle.³

Church evokes other legends as well (the Green Knight of the Pearl-poet, the outlaw Robin Hood). But this land’s mysteries also fuse with its political history, specifically through “The Wizard Earl,” Henry Percy, the ninth Earl of Northumberland, so called for his interest in alchemy and magic. Our poet imagines a mythic North defined by its signature landscape of peaks, edges and hills, intimately tied to its people and their folklore.

David Ashford of Kent witnesses a very different North, defeated by politics, weather, and mere chance:

Up North, rarely do I go there,

³ The nineteenth-century librarian and antiquary William E. A. Axon discusses various iterations of the story in his folklore study, *Cheshire Gleanings* (Manchester: Tubbs, Brook, and Chrystal, 1884), 56-68.

At southerners, the folk do stare,
Food nought but chips and pie,
A southern softy, they call I,
The colliery shut, Thatcher they blame,
But who'd go back to that old game?
Terraced houses are every street,
Weather poor, Lord give me heat!
Football is religion and more,
About its tales the people bore,
National anthem the Hovis song,
Everything here has gone wrong,
Not London but before Scotland,
The North is a strange old land.⁴

In stark contrast to Church, Ashford depicts the region as a landscape of bizarre ritual, poor climate, and dull stories. Its industry, particularly coal (“The colliery shut”), is outdated (“who’d go back to that old game?”), its people cling to sports as an escape and salvation (“Football is religion and more”), and its cold streets are littered with indistinguishable houses that match the region’s insipid character.

⁴ “Poems on the North-South Divide,” *BBC News Magazine*, online (February 17, 2009), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7894529.stm/ (accessed October 20, 2009)

Ashford's grim verse is not far off. A 2004 census report conducted by Sheffield University confirmed what many English citizens like Ashford already knew: the North-South divide continues to widen. The North of England grows poorer while the South grows richer. The study notes, for instance, that the financial base of London and the "Home counties" around the capital created some 1.7 million new jobs between 1991-2001 while the Northern provinces lost 500,000 jobs. Disparities between North and South are reflected, further, in education levels, healthcare, and rates of death.⁵

Most telling line, however, is Ashford's allusion to the "Hovis song." Neither the song itself—Antonín Dvorak's theme from the second movement of his New World Symphony—nor the commercials for which it was used—a series of popular 1970s television ads for the British bread company, Hovis—are as striking as Ashford's ascription of the tune as the North's "national anthem."⁶ Here and throughout the poem, Ashford intimates the longstanding belief that the North of England is like another

⁵ Daniel Dorling and Bethan Thomas, *People and Places: A 2001 Census Atlas of the UK* (Bristol: Policy, 2004).

⁶ The early Hovis television ads depict scenes of the working-class in post-war Britain. The 1974 ad, "Bike Ride" was directed by northerner Ridley Scott (of *Alien* and *Gladiator* fame) and has been voted the most popular television ad of all time in Britain. What explains Ashford's "anthem" line, however, is the fact that two of these early ads, "Northern" (1973) and "Runaway" (1979), depict working-class folk speaking in very distinct northern dialect and colloquialisms. The company itself began in the Cheshire East town of Macclesfield in 1887, and its slogan states of the product: "Its as good for you today as its always been."

country altogether. What is more, his attention to nationalism in the North illustrates the strange confluence of region and nation in the North-South divide. The English North is “Not London” but is “before Scotland,” a strangely liminal space between the familiar South and those undesirables north of the River Tweed. Church’s and Ashford’s poems illustrate not only the extant division in England between the two regions, but also the starkly different views taken by these two southerners towards the North. Church’s North is a place of wonder and mystery, and her words bespeak a fascination and restrained admiration. Ashford derides the North as a hopeless place where “everything has gone wrong.” Explaining such divergent views, historian Stuart Rawnsley argues that the North “evokes a greater sense of identity than any other ‘region’ of the country [while at] the same time it provokes the most derision and rejection from those whose identity has been constructed and shaped elsewhere.”⁷ Though the rift itself is undeniable, the conflicting sentiments toward the North muddle the North-South divide’s history.

Scholars have often debated the origins of this division. Although Helen Jewell’s seminal study on the North-South divide thoroughly illustrates the diachrony of the rift from the early medieval period to the present, many scholars persist in viewing it

⁷ Stuart Rawnsley, “Constructing ‘the North’: Space and a Sense of Places,” in *Northern Identities: Historical Interpretations of ‘The North’ and ‘Northernness’*, ed. Neville Kirk (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2000), 3.

as an effect of the Industrial Revolution in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁸

Noted sociologist Rob Shields claims,

The contemporary dichotomous North and South view came into focus with nineteenth-century literary works which responded to the rapid industrialization of the North (and the emergence of an urbanized industrial elite which challenged the social status of the landed aristocracy largely centered in the Home Counties around London).⁹

Shields alludes here to a body of literary texts, the most famous of which are Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations*. These works illustrate the cultural differences between industrial North and agrarian South, and, in the view of Shields and others, contribute to the polarization that still exists today. Similarly, two recent studies analyzing the distinct character of the English North—Dave Russell's *Looking North* and the authors of the essay collection *Northern Identities*—begin their discussions with the nineteenth century, moving forward to the millennium while attending to the topics of music, stage and film, sport, tourism, and language as aspects of the region's distinct identity within Britain.¹⁰

⁸ Helen Jewell, *The North-South Divide: The beginnings of northern consciousness in England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

⁹ Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 207.

¹⁰ Dave Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Kirk, ed., *Northern Identities*

But the North's confounding disposition is not new. These modern depictions are endemic to the region's character in the writings of English poets, clerks, and chroniclers of the Middle Ages. Remarkably, even when scholars have attended to the North-South divide before the Industrial Age, they have found it difficult to admit the rift's cultural prominence. The essay collection *Geographies of England: The North-South Divide, Material and Imagined* traces the division backwards from the present day to the Norman Invasion of 1066. Historian Bruce M.S. Campbell, whose contribution analyzes the medieval period from 1066-1550, acknowledges that in the Middle Ages "differences between the North and South are not hard to find," but he questions whether these differences really divided the realm. He argues that by the thirteenth century "there is nothing to suggest that there was any contemporary concept of a 'North-South divide'"; rather, the period is notable for the "emergence of a growing sense of national consciousness, which overrode older regional identities."¹¹ Campbell is right to view the period as one of emergent nationalism, but his conclusion—that "the one North-South divide that was as real as it was imagined was that between England and Scotland"—does not take into account the impact of the tenuous relationship between the North and the rest of the realm on the formation of a national consciousness in medieval England.

¹¹ Bruce M. S. Campbell, "North-South Dichotomies, 1066-1550," *Geographies of England: The North-South Divide, Material and Imagined*, Eds. Alan R. Baker and Mark Billinge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 167.

For nearly twenty years, medieval historians and literary critics have sought and debated forms of medieval nationhood. Their arguments have contested Benedict Anderson's well-known observation that the "nation" as we know it is a late eighteenth century phenomenon.¹² Medieval historian R. R. Davies, in one of his final essays, emphasizes the similarities between definitions of the modern nation-state and definitions of a medieval nation. Davies argues that England's "self-identification as a separate and unified people, its 'regal solidarity' as a tightly-textured kingdom, and its effective cultivation of its own historical mythology—were woven tightly together to create a credible 'nation state.'"¹³ England overcomes foreign invasion, civil strife, and a remarkable conflation of different peoples (Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Danes, Normans, Flemings) with what Davies calls "civic ethnicity," the broad acceptance of common rule and allegiance to a single king.¹⁴ Davies points out, as a very early example, the common use of the term "Angelcyn" [English] in the late ninth century to illustrate the "process of ethnogenesis, of creating people" that was taking place in the realm.¹⁵ In the entry for 886, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* explains: "Ðy ilcan geare ge sette Ælfred cyning Lunden burh. and him eall Angel cyn to ge cyrde" [The same year King Alfred

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 1991).

¹³ R.R. (Rees) Davies, "Nations and National Identities in the Medieval World: An Apologia," *Revue Belge D'Histoire Contemporaine* 34 (2004): 575.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 574.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 572.

occupied London fort; and the all the English race turned to him].¹⁶ This sense of a single people and their kingdom pervades extant rolls and legal documents, histories and literary texts.

Davies' argument along with other important historical studies such as Susan Reynolds' *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900-1300* have challenged Anderson's view that nation is a post-Enlightenment phenomenon. Nevertheless Anderson's definition of nation as an "imagined political community" has offered astounding utility for critical demonstrations of nationalism in medieval texts and cultures.¹⁷ Davies himself calls medieval English nationhood an "historical mythology" of which the Venerable Bede was "the founding father."¹⁸ Similarly, writing about the nation-building work of twelfth-century historians like Henry of Huntingdon, Thorlac Turville-Petre, argues that "The construction of the nation was, indeed, founded on a

¹⁶ The Anglo-Saxon text is taken from *Two of the Saxon Chronicles*, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 81. The translation is taken from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. and ed. M.J. Swinton (London: J. M. Dent, 1996), 81. Quotations in each edition are from the Peterborough Manuscript (E) Oxford Bodleian Library MS Laud 636.

¹⁷ See Michelle Warren's discussion of Anderson in *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100-1300* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 10.

¹⁸ Davies, 574.

series of myths and loaded interpretations of the past.”¹⁹ He attends to late-thirteenth and early fourteenth century texts—vernacular works such as the London-produced Auchinleck MS and the northeast-midlands poem *Havelok the Dane*—that imagine and promote a united realm and a common tongue. Patricia Clare Ingham looks to England’s “celtic fringe,” Wales and its borders with England, to argue that “medieval community is imagined not through homogenous stories of a singular ‘people,’ but through narratives of sovereignty as a negotiation of differences, of ethnicity, region, language, class, and gender.”²⁰ Finally, Kathy Lavezzo reveals how medieval writers defined their nation through the insular realm’s marginality to the rest of the world as evidenced in mappaemundi. Lavezzo explains that authors like John Skelton, Ranulph Higden, Geoffrey Chaucer and others “imagine how, if the English seemed like wild dwellers of a world frontier, they also could appear as the blessed inhabitants of a sublime otherworld.”²¹ Their imagined community comes together as a people who are “the furthest thing from central.”²² With attention to language, religion, geography, and the cultural interplay between England and the others against which it most often

¹⁹ Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 6.

²⁰ Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 9.

²¹ Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 21.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

defined its own identity—Wales, Ireland, and Scotland—these critics illustrate medieval England’s emergent national consciousness.²³

The peculiar figure of the North has remained, however, largely absent in scholarship about medieval English nationhood.²⁴ It is my conviction that the supposed outsider—the North of England—had a significant impact upon medieval England’s conversations about nation, and that it functioned constitutively—as a contested geography, a literary character, and a spectral presence—in the negotiation and representation of the national identity in canonical Medieval texts. In order to understand the emergence of the medieval English nation fully we must understand exactly how England worked through the unsettling paradox of the North. Throughout the Middle Ages, the North of England looms as a cultural and political bogeyman over the rest of the realm. As a border community promising to defend England from the foreign incursion of the Scots while at the same time evoking fear as a landscape already, in the words of one chronicler, “full of filthy, treacherous, subhuman Scots,”

²³ For a thorough recounting of nation in medieval studies, see Lavezzo’s “Introduction,” in *Imagining A Medieval English Nation*, ed. Kathy Lavezzo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), vii-xix.

²⁴ Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 188, devotes some space to understanding the politics of the Anglo-Scottish border in the fifteenth century. She claims that “a policy of ‘internal colonialism has consequences for intra-English relations as well as for Anglo-Scots, or English-Welsh, ones.’”

the North induces anxiety over the paradox of its physical and cultural geography.²⁵ Unlike the Irish, the Welsh, and even the enemy Scots, northerners remained within the borders of England while at the same time far-flung from the ideological heart of the realm in the South.²⁶ This geographic remoteness calls to mind what Lavezzo terms “problematic lacks: to be ‘barren,’ to be ‘fragile,’ and to ‘degenerate.’”²⁷ For non-northerners, then, the North’s marginality insinuated a sterile nationalism, a weak military vanguard, and a culturally inferior people. A 1385 entry in the Westminster Chronicle sums up such a view. Commenting on the defense of the borders, the author contends, “Whereas in the old days our Northerners used to be very active and vigorous, they have ... become lazy and spiritless, disdaining to protect their homeland against the wiles of the enemy.”²⁸ This ambivalence to a national defense is coupled with a long history of aggressiveness and rebellion that finds the North, as John Trevisa translates

²⁵ Richard Devizes, *The Chronicle of Richard Devizes of the Time of King Richard the First*, ed. John T. Appleby (London: Thomas Nelson, 1963), 66-67.

²⁶ The South’s prominence as the ruling center of England grew particularly in the late-thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Campbell, “North-South dichotomies,” 158, notes that other than times of war, medieval kings spent much of their time in the South and Midlands, of which “London and Westminster ... were [the] nerve center,” and which held the majority of their palaces and hunting grounds. Notably, by 1350, eighty-five percent of all councils and parliaments were held in London and Westminster.”

²⁷ Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World*, 80.

²⁸ *The Westminster Chronicle 1381-1394*, ed. L. C. Hector and Barbara F. Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 139.

Higden's *Polychronicon* in 1387, "more unstable, more cruel, and more unesy" than England's other regions.²⁹

We find an illustration of the North's duality in one of the most popular vernacular texts of the English Middle Ages. In Passus I of the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, William Langland describes the fall of Satan and notes the devil's preference for the North:

Ponam pedem meum in aquilone, et similis ero altissimo.

Lord! why wolde he tho, þat wykkede Lucifer,

Luppen alofte in þe north syde

Thenne sitten in þe sonne syde þere þe day roweth? (110-13)³⁰

Langland alludes here to Isaiah 14:13, wherein Lucifer claims that he will "ascend into the heavens" ("In caelum conscendam") and sit "in the sides of the North" ("in lateribus aquilonis"). Langland, however, makes his reference to this typology uniquely English.

He continues:

Ne were it for northerne men a-non ich wolde telle.

²⁹ Ranulph Higden and John Trevisa, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, Monachi Cestrensis; Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Churchill Babington (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869), 167.

³⁰ Quotations of Langland are from *Piers Plowman: The C-Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994). In this edition, Latin quotations not containing English words and/or not pertinent to the syntax of the surrounding English lines are unnumbered.

Ac isch wolfe lacke no lyf quath that lady sothly;
 Hit is sykerer by soothe ther the sonne regneth
 Than in the north by meny notes no mane leve other.
 For thider as the fend flegh hus fote for to sette
 Ther he failede and ful and hus felawes alle;
 And helle is ther he ys and he ther ybounde. (115-21)

In alluding to the patristic aspect of northernness in medieval theology (the North as the home of Lucifer), Langland acknowledges a second view of the North more closely akin to the cultural and political landscape of the medieval England in which he writes: the real history, geography and people of the oft-derided English North. Langland appears to make a kindly gesture to his northern neighbors, passing over any further explanation of diabolic northernness so as not to offend England's northern men ("Ne were it for northerne men ..."). Yet the lines that follow suggest he offends playfully and purposefully. The South is more desirable than the North because of the warmth of the sun ("sonne") and, by allusion, Christ (the *sone*) who reigns there.³¹ Beyond these reasons are "meny notes" more. We may read Langland's allusion with sarcasm: that his readers, fellow non-northerners—and more specifically the Londoners in whose

³¹ The linguistic ambiguity of *sonne* is two-fold. The *Middle English Dictionary* shows the flexibility of the noun *sonne* as denoting the celestial object (sun) and, in some cases, *filius*, and this duality is conceivably at work in Augustine's own commentary above, which links a redeeming warmth with Christ's presence in the south.

circles the converted Midlander, Langland, moved—know exactly why one would place Lucifer in the culturally-backward frontier of the North of England rather than in the South, where it is safer (“sykerer”).

Although he represses any explicit desire for the North in his disparaging sarcasm, Langland nonetheless intimates his own awareness of the region’s complex character. In the Latin declarative of these passages (*Ponam pedem meum ...*) he alludes to Augustine’s exegetical reading of Isaiah 14:13, Augustine explains:

The North is wont to be contrary to [Z]ion: [Z]ion forsooth is in the South, the North over against the South. Who is the North, but He who said, *I will sit in the sides of the North, I will be like the Most High*? The devil had held dominion over the ungodly, and possessed the nations serving images, adoring demons; and all whatsoever there was of human kind any where throughout the world, by cleaving to him, had become North. But since he who binds the strong man taketh away his goods, and maketh them His own foods; men delivered from infidelity and superstition of devils, believing in Christ, are fitted on to that city, have met in the corner that wall that cometh from the circumcision, and that was made the city of the great King, which had been the sides of the North. Therefore also in another Scripture is it said, *Out of the North*

*come clouds of golden colour: great is the glory and honour of the
Almighty.*³²

In other words, the North is the place of the devil, but that place will be remade through its proximity to the city of Zion and the forthcoming presence of God. On His return, the Almighty will descend from the North, illuminating the bleak clouds with gold, undoing the devil's work in the North through His own presence and in His own likeness. The biblical North, then, provokes both disdain and longing, a place both frightening through Lucifer's presence and intimate in Christ's salvific return.

Langland's sarcastic digs suggest that coupling this biblical precedent of a diabolic North with the troubled English North was commonplace. Geoffrey Chaucer alludes to this typology in a second literary example. In the *Friar's Tale*, a corrupt summoner wanders into his local woods to seek out a widow to extort. As he goes, he encounters a "gay yeman, under a forest syde" (III.1380) who "hadde upon a courtepy of grene" (III.1382).³³ The summoner quickly warms to this mysterious figure, partly wooed by the forester's claim that he had "gold and silver in my cheste" (III.1400), and

³² Editor's emphasis. *Expositions on the Book of Psalms by S. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Translated with Notes and Indices in Six Volumes*, vol. 2, (Oxford and London: John Henry Parker; F. and J. Rivington, 1848), 289. Line 111 of *Piers Plowman* essentially translates Augustine's Latin words quoted in the previous line (*Ponam pedem meum...*). For further discussion of the typology in these lines in Langland, see Alfred L. Kellogg, "Satan, Langland, and the North," *Speculum* 24 (1949): 413-414.

³³ All quotations of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987).

if the summoner “comen in oure shire, / Al shal be thyn, right as thou wolt desire”

(III.1400-02). The summoner begs,

Teche me, whil that we ryden by the weye,

Syn that ye been a baillif as am I,

Som subtiltee, and tel me feithfully

In myn office how that I may moost wyne. (III. 1418-21)

For the summoner, this forester is a new cohort—“as my brother” (III.1423)—who extorts his own victims “by sleyghte or by violence” (III. 1431). Reassured by the affinity between the yeoman and himself, the summoner seems to pass off as humor the yeoman’s devlish confession: although he claimed to come from “fer in the north contree ” (III.1413), the dark yeoman reveals that he is, in fact, “a feend” whose “dwellyng is in helle” (III. 1448). In the ensuing ride through the forest, the disbelieving summoner mockingly tests his comrade. They come upon a carter cursing his wagon, stuck in the mud: “The devel have al, both hors and cart and hey” (III. 1547). The summoner takes the carter’s words literally and commands his fiendish friend to seize the carter’s property, “Hent it anon, for he hath yeve it thee” (III. 1553). But the fiend claims that the carter’s comments are not in earnest, so he cannot claim his property. The two ride on to a widow’s house. The smug summoner attempts to extort money for the widow’s groundless indiscretions, “certayn thyngs” (III.1589), to which she replies, “Unto the devel blak and rough of hewe / Yeve I thy body and my panne also!” (III.1622-23). The fiend confirms her response—that she is earnest in her request—and

suddenly turns on the unwitting summoner: “Thy body and this panne been myne by right. / Thou shalt with me to helle yet tonyght” (III. 1635-36). The fiend, then, drags the summoner to hell in an unsettling conclusion to tale.

Like Langland, Chaucer’s tale evinces a connection between the North’s diabolic typology and its confounded regional character. The yeoman-fiend’s attack on the summoner is what we might describe as “uncanny,” a Freudian expression that conjoins the known and the unknown, the familiar with the frighteningly unfamiliar.³⁴ In exploring the term “uncanny” (*unheimlich*), Freud famously scrutinizes the definitions of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in various lexicons, and he finds that the terms seem to merge—synonym and antonym—into one. Indeed, Freud’s term fittingly captures the North’s problematic identity in the Middle Ages, born of its rebellious history, its precarious position between hegemonic lower England and the enemy Scotland, and its consequent ambiguity as either a loyal frontline of defense or place

³⁴ Freud’s translators offer as English equivalents of these terms “homely” and “unhomely,” and also “familiar” and “unfamiliar,” the latter of which I will use interchangeably in this essay along with related terms such as “known” and “unknown,” and “familiar” and “strange.” All quotations of Freud are taken from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. James Strachey with Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 217-52. For more on *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, see Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McIntock (London: Penguin, 2003), 123-34.

“much given to rebellion.”³⁵ Freud notes that this ambivalence of meaning suggests itself to the notion of the repressed in psychoanalysis. The return of the repressed is uncanny because it is frightening, yet at the same is “familiar and old-established in the mind” and “has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”³⁶ For the world’s sinners, Christ’s return, by way of the North, brings with it the judgment they have long repressed. For the thieving summoner in Chaucer’s *Friar’s Tale*, the turn of his seeming northern “brother” into a fiend—who pulls him to Hell—is the judgment he has refused to anticipate while he preys on the innocent victims of the wood. The puzzling fusion of Freud’s terms perfectly conveys the sense of the puzzled character of the North, which likewise promises to save England while at the same time threatening its very being.

The anxiety stemming from the North’s haunting presence is not merely the product of southern-derived stereotypes and superstitions. The North was, in part, responsible for its vexing reputation in the Middle Ages. Russell notes that scholarship on the North-South divide

often underestimates the extent to which the region has been active in its own making and it is important to remember the ‘national imagination’, while undoubtedly receiving its most influential molding in that loosely defined territory we call the ‘South’, is shaped and experienced in many

³⁵ “... populus semper rebellionem deditus.” William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, 499.

³⁶Freud, 241.

different locales including the North.³⁷

Numerous rebellions by northerners against the Crown and the south-centered government contributed to England's anxiety over the region, anxiety that provoked negative characterizations of the North. In 1069, for example, the northern populace aligned with King Swein II of Denmark and the exiled English claimant to the throne, Edgar Ætheling, to overthrow William I. The revolt elicited the King's infamous response, a crushing military campaign known as the "harrying of the North." In the late fourteenth century, the powerful Percy family, figureheads for the North and guardians of the northern borders, assisted in the overthrow of Richard II and soon thereafter met their own fate in rebellion against Henry IV. Given the North's role in shaping its identity in England and in order to account for a fuller understanding of the North-South divide's impact on nationalism in medieval England, I do not simply consider those articulations of non-northerners like Langland or Chaucer; rather, I also look for northern voices that speaks back to criticisms of the region, that challenges its marginality and asserts its autonomy.

Such a regional approach to nation has been taken recently by Robert Barrett. In disagreeing with what he claims are critics' elisions of the regional and national in scholarship on medieval nationhood, Barrett turns the center-periphery model inside-

³⁷Russell, *Looking North*, 4.

out, “demonstrating Cheshire’s claims to central status.”³⁸ Reading broadly the medieval and early-modern literature emerging from Cheshire, Barrett’s account reveals “the strategies whereby local writers, texts, and performances maintain regional continuity in response to the administrative pressures of academic and political centers,” an approach he considers “a viable alternative to the national space/time that still defines both countries and canons.”³⁹ Like the palatinate of medieval Cheshire—a region holding sovereign rights and privileges largely to rule itself separate from the kingdom—the North of England challenged the realm’s authority while remaining a vital component.⁴⁰ Reading the North-South divide from a regional perspective while still within the purview of nation more fully illustrates the resistances and negotiations at work in the emergent national discourse of medieval England.

Both the critical methods of reading nation broadly in medieval England and Barrett’s regional approach to nation inform chapter one of this study. Examining the infancy of the North-South divide in the twelfth century, I consider the problematic

³⁸ Robert W. Barrett, Jr. *Against All England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ In the late fourteenth century, Richard II aspired to make Cheshire the new capital of England. This was because of his ongoing feud with London itself and because he felt that Cheshire was a better strategic location for dealing with Wales, Ireland and Scotland. For an analysis of Richard’s Cheshire obsession, see John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 69-77; see also Chapter 3 of the present study, 123n.

relationship of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*—still viewed as a foundational text of English identity—to the proliferation of histories seeking to redefine Englishness in the wake of the Norman Conquest. I argue that the period's seminal historian, William of Malmesbury, notices the distinct regional undercurrent, a northernness, in Bede's eighth-century text. William's derision of the North in his own history is juxtaposed with his desire both to claim Bede as “the Father of English History” and to overwrite the intense regionalism of Bede's text. Their relationship reveals the ways in which the regional voice complicates, even undercuts, the ideological force of the national voice trying to suppress it.

In chapter two I examine the conflict between the “naciones”—northern and southern—within the medieval English universities. Segregated by these vague regional descriptors, students nevertheless demonstrate the intense animosity pervading the North-South divide. I turn to a particularly turbulent event, the Stamford Schism from 1334-1336, in which northern scholars fled Oxford under oppression by their southern counterparts, for an alternative university in Lincolnshire. I analyze two obscure poems that emerged from the Schism written by northerners who defiantly mock both their southern enemies and the governing body of the university itself. While conflict within the halls and colleges of medieval Oxford and Cambridge is a microcosm of larger, intranational tensions, the Stamford Schism illustrates how a local clash between North and South escalates to threaten not only England's intellectual center but, as a consequence, England's sense of self. In the end, only the King and a bevy of legal and

clerical officials from across England are able resolve the Schism.

As chapter three of this study shows, Chaucer demonstrates a deft attention to the region's puzzled character in the *Canterbury Tales*. In the *Reeve's Tale* the miller Symkyn is a socially-offensive fabliau villain, and the simple plot of a "gylour ... bigyled" (I.4321) is complicated by the northernness that inheres in the two bumbling Cambridge clerks who oppose him. While they heroically stifle Symkyn's thievery, their violent turn in the tale's finale has long been unsettling. Chaucer's northerners are gallant and threatening, clever and cruel, and we see, finally, in the "Father of English Poetry" both hope and anxiety for the unity of the realm amidst the turmoil of the late fourteenth century.

The fifteenth-century ballad *A Gest of Robyn Hode* shows how, as Barrett explains, "[r]egional identity is simultaneously oppositional and compliant."⁴¹ In chapter four, I read the ballad as a resistance text that dramatizes the North's struggle to come to terms with its fledgling self-rule amidst government centralization in the late fifteenth century. Until that time, the North maintained a precarious relationship with the realm, defending the northern borders against an emboldened Scotland while remaining largely autonomous from strict control of the central government and the Crown. Its combination of servitude and independence was embodied by the great northern magnates, particularly the aforementioned Earls of Northumberland, the Percies, whose military resources and provincial following nearly rivaled that of the

⁴¹ Barrett, 18.

King. But centralization wrested self-rule from the North and from these lords. The *Gest* takes up the convoluted relationship of these “Kings in the North” and England’s King—and therein the relationship of the North and the realm—through the confluence of Robin Hood and King Edward in its later episodes.⁴²

The North, at once an object of scorn and a province essential to the security of the interior kingdom, stands outside the canon of that “native” English literature committed to unification—that is, to the creation of a national identity earned by the overcoming of regional differences and the fear of strangers beyond the realm’s immediate borders (Welsh, Scots, and Irish). An examination of a northern consciousness in medieval literature complicates and enhances scholarship that focuses upon emergent nationalism in the Middle Ages. My *longue durée* historicist approach to texts concerned with the North—through narrative setting, character, author or textual provenance—ultimately uncovers the emerging dialectic of region and nation within the medieval North-South divide and reveals how England’s nationalist impulse found its greatest expression when it was threatened from within by the uncanny figure of the North.

⁴² The designation of “Kings in the North” is given to the Percies by historian Alexander Rose in his recent study of the family’s long history. Rose sums up the situation in the North as follows: “In that tumultuous place, the Westminster-based, Southern king’s writ hardly ran. In Percy country, there was Percy law backed by a Percy army paid for by Percy money.” Rose, *Kings in the North: The House of Percy in British History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002), 1.

Chapter One

“Relocating Bede: William of Malmesbury and the Problem of the North”

Around 731 AD, the Northumbrian monk Bede completed his seminal *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. Though written in the early eighth century during the heptarchy of Angle, Saxon and Jutish kingdoms, Bede’s *Historia* fabricates an inherent unity—not merely religious—among the inhabitants of these disparate territories.¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen eloquently encapsulates Bede’s labor: “by imagining the island’s past as a story heroically accomplished by this putative collective, by distilling a complicated historical field into the chronicle of a single people, Bede breathes life into the collective identity *English* and ... imagines a past, that, despite ample evidence to the contrary, seems monolithic, pure.”² Given its invention of ethnic continuity, it is not surprising that Bede’s *Historia* found renewed popularity in the wake of the Norman invasion of 1066. Though the Norman regime can be seen to subdue English resistance through sheer martial brutality, Normans were eager to infuse themselves into English culture, both retaining English laws and promoting a distinct cultural unity wherein they merged into the body English.³ Stemming from this project, numerous twelfth-century

¹ The heptarchy consisted of the kingdoms of Kent, Wessex, Sussex, Essex, East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria (Bernicia and Deira).

² Author’s emphasis. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Mostrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 47.

³ In his detailed analysis of the process of assimilation between the Normans and the English, Hugh M. Thomas shows that “though there was no official ideology of

historiographers—men like Henry of Huntingdon, Geffrei Gaimar, Ailred of Rievaulx, and William of Malmesbury—fashioned English histories that contribute to what Robert Stein has called “[t]he master narrative ... of the rise of the Norman state in England” wherein “an English state is ... both the precursor and preordained outcome of the story.”⁴ Such a narrative depends on a seamless, if fictitious, genealogy of the English people surviving through centuries of invasion and cultural incursion and culminating in the new, Anglo-Norman England. For many of these writers the textual source of this narrative of heroic Englishness was Bede’s *Historia*, and it was to Bede that they appealed as primogenitor in their new histories.

Recent scholarship, however, has noted a regionalist undercurrent in Bede’s history. Antonia Gransden concludes that “Bede loved the Anglo-Saxon people in general, but he loved the Northumbrians in particular ... [He] devoted a disproportionate amount of space to Northumbria ... [and] in places his work reads like a panegyric on Northumbria.”⁵ The *Historia*’s explicit regionalism complicates our understanding of Bede’s reception by these twelfth-century historians. Beyond the mere fact that Bede’s text shows regionalist preferences, his attention particularly to the

assimilation, there clearly was a theoretical policy, stemming from the king.” Thomas, *The English and the Normans: Ethnic Hostility, Assimilation and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87.

⁴ Robert Stein, *Reality Fictions: Romance, History, and Governmental Authority, 1025-1180* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 89-90.

⁵ Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1996), 24.

North of England would have proved troubling to a medieval reader like William of Malmesbury. For William, writing a history of the kings of England in the 1120s, the North was a menace to the unity of the realm. This association is clear in numerous examples from his histories. More than any other region, the North and its people threatened English kings as well as early attempts to unify the disparate regions of England before and after the Conquest of 1066. In other words, over the course of the early history of the emergent English realm, the North significantly and repeatedly threatened the concept of Englishness, the very term that authors like William hoped to clarify in their new chronicles.

Both desired and derided, Northumbria's twofold identity grows more problematic once the region is subsumed into the rest of England in the later eleventh century. Unlike Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, the North always remains within the borders of England. As the introduction to this study explains, the North lurks at the margins of the kingdom, neither clearly friend or foe, always in rebellion and thus fundamentally beyond yet at the same time intimate with the rest of England. The North's persistent, often self-destructive urge for autonomy marks the region's uncanniness as the rest of England gazes upon it, particularly in the late-eleventh and early-twelfth centuries. Hugh Thomas wittily explains of early Norman England that "there is ample evidence that contemporaries saw all the northern counties as part of

England, and their inhabitants as English, albeit Englishness with a difference.”⁶ This difference complicates the concept of Englishness and threatens the English nation-state as it existed for the twelfth-century historians hoping to affirm its being.

It is thus important to examine how this whole history of the rebellious North affected the twelfth-century reception of its *auctor*, Bede, and his regionalist text lying at the center of English history and identity. As England came to grips with the influx of new Normans and a Norman regime that willed—through martial force and infrastructural control—a unity not experienced before in the realm, Bede’s *Historia* and its expressed Englishness were appropriated for use in forging a clear sense of what can be described as a uniform English nation. We must consider the traumatic consequences of finding a regional text at the core of a national mythology.

The Problem of the North

The problem of Bede’s inherent regionalism is particularly vexing for William of Malmesbury, arguably the most famous of medieval historians save for Geoffrey of Monmouth. More importantly, William is the historian most invested in Bede’s national and historical legacy. Critics single him out as a “second Bede,” “Bede’s heir,” and Bede’s “self-appointed successor,” ascriptions that intimate a filial association between

⁶Thomas, *The English and the Normans*, 271, points out, for example, a charter of Edward the Confessor, just prior to the Norman invasion, which defines Edward as king of the English *and* the Northumbrians. Thomas, further, notes similar passages in Aelred of Rievaulx, Richard of Hexham, Reginald of Durham, and William of Newburgh.

William and the so-called “Father of English History.”⁷ Bede is always already present, as the very first sentence of William’s historical opus, the *Gestum Regum Anglorum* (c. 1125), illustrates: “The history of the English ... has been told ... by Bede, most learned and least proud of men.”⁸ William must embrace Bede’s Anglo-Saxon history in order to reconstitute a seamless genealogy of the English in the wake of the Norman Conquest. Yet, later in his prologue to Book I of the *Gestum Regum*, William concedes that he will “let most [of Bede] go by” [*pluribus valefatiens*]. Changing tactics almost as he begins, William invokes Bede only to disavow him just a few sentences later. Compare this strategy to his contemporary, Henry of Huntingdon, who claims to use Bede “where [he] could” [*qua potui*].⁹ We might explain this difference as simply an economic decision to avoid repeating the material Bede already wrote; but I would suggest that William’s omission of Bede points towards his desire to negate Bede’s text altogether.

⁷ Peter Damian-Grint, *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Inventing Vernacular Authority* (Woodbridgem Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1999), 91; N. J. Higham, *Re-Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London: Routledge 2006), 27; Gransden, *Historical Writing in England* vol. 1, 169.

⁸ All quotations of William of Malmesbury’s *Gestum Regum Anglorum* (hereafter cited as *GR*) are taken from *Gestum Regum Anglorum*, vol. 1, 2 vols., ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). “Anlgorum gestas Beda, vir maxime doctus et minime superbus ...” (Ibid., 14-15).

⁹ Henry Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum, The History of the English People*, ed. Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 7.

These competing claims are followed in William's *Gestum Regum* by distinct moments where he overwrites Bede's own text, suggesting a deeper antagonism underlying William's veneration for the monk. This enmity, I would suggest, stems from William's own encounter with Bede's regionalism—the uncanny northerness of Bede's text. At the heart of Bede's *Historia*, the textual centerpiece of Englishness, lies the very region that most resists English community. Despite his success as Bede's historical heir, William either represses Bede's own versions or reworks them in an act of negation that deadens the northern effect of Bede's history. He continues this northern repression/suppression throughout his own history. William views the North, beginning with the Anglo-Saxon North he reads in Bede, as a region infused with violence, rebellion, and degeneration. Such a North, as it is represented in Bede's history and as it lurks at the borders of the English realm in the early twelfth century, threatens to undo the national community William and his contemporaries labor to fashion.

Striving explicitly to acknowledge Britain's diversity of peoples and, at the same time, to proffer a unified sense of Englishness, William pays attention to those people beyond the borders of England ever threatening to undo its wholeness. As we would expect, he finds the Welsh “in constant revolt,” the Irish a “poor ... unskilful ... ragged

mob of rustic[s]” and the Scots characterized by a “familiarity with fleas.”¹⁰ William thus defines England as a subject against the many savage others within Britain, but in doing so he also runs up against a distinctly different sort of alterity in the North. William finds that “land north of the Humber” to be “barbaric and cruel,” and “ever ripe for rebellion.”¹¹ In an oft-cited passage, William comments on northern speech in Book III of his second great history, *Gestum Pontificum Anglorum*: “Of course, the whole language of the Northumbrians, particularly in York, is so inharmonious and uncouth that we southerners can make nothing of it.”¹² The southerner William claims that Northerners speak crudely because of their proximity to barbarians. He blames Northumbrian savagery on the region’s distance from the Norman kings of England, who chose to remain in the South. William writes the *Gestum Pontificum* around 1127, immediately following his completion of the *Gestum Regum*. Linguists today hear in William’s words a testimony to the proliferation of English dialects in the early Middle

¹⁰ “Walenses ... semper in rebellionem.” *GR*, 726-27; “... immo pro inscientia cultorum ieiumum ... agrestem et squalidam multitudinem Hibernensium.” *GR*, 738-39; “Scottus familiaritatem pulicum.” *GR*, 606-7.

¹¹ “terram Transhumbranam.” *GR*, 420-21; “populus semper rebellionem deditus.” *GR*, 499.

¹² All quotations of William of Malmesbury’s *Gestum Pontificum Anglorum* (hereafter *GP*) are taken from William of Malmesbury, *Gestum Pontificum Anglorum*, vol. 1, 2 vols., ed. M. Winterbottom, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). “Sane tota lingua Nordanhimbrorum, et maxime in Eboraco, ita inconditum stridet ut nichil nos australes intelligere possimus” (*Ibid.*, 326-27).

Ages, yet William's invective also articulates regional disparagement. His slurs against the North sound much like those against Wales, Scotland, or Ireland, but the North is nevertheless intimate to England, nestled within its borders. It provokes greater anxiety, and even though it must remain "of England," William's negative northern consciousness works to stifle the region's autonomy and lays the foundation for the discourse of the North-South divide.

The immediate North that confronts William, however, is not geographic but textual. He must deal with Bede's northernness. In referring to the "northernness" in Bede's text, I do not mean simply those moments when in his history he speaks of Northumbria—its kings and bishops, its geography and its customs. Instead, northernness is found in the way those accounts repeatedly signify the region's fractious historical, political and cultural presence. As scholars have recently argued, Bede's history seems driven by a regional imperative rather than any desire to put forward a uniform English identity. N.J. Higham sees the overall design of the *Historia* "inclined ... to the portrayal of characters of greater interest to the author and his immediate, regional audience."¹³ Higham continues that "[Bede] was writing both as a biblical scholar and as a Northumbrian, with a preference for the re-establishment of his own immediate gens (people) with the full force of divine approbation."¹⁴ This regional perspective may seem unimportant at first glance. Eighth-century Britain with its

¹³ Higham, *Re-Reading Bede*, 77.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

disparate kingdoms was not twelfth-century England under centralized Norman rule, but that very post-Conquest context informs William's reception of Bede's history. Like many of his contemporaries, William of Malmesbury aims to fashion a distinct cultural unity born of historical continuity. This narrative then undergirds the mythology of Englishness, a medieval form of nation that Davies describes as "a sense of historical identity ... which bolsters and justifies their sense of distinctiveness."¹⁵ Bede's reputation necessitates his inclusion in histories such as William's. But if William appropriates Bede's *Historia* to reconstitute the concept of the Englishness for Norman England, he must confront not the affirmation of a unified English people but the very signifier of its impossibility: the North of England.

William is, as Rodney M. Thomson notes, particularly aware of "the relationship between texts," especially his source texts.¹⁶ William could not merely overlook the differences at the heart of Bede's text and infiltrating his own. The relationship between William and Bede, therefore, should not be understood in the passive terms of heritage and continuation but in the active terms of aggressivity and negation. Despite William's explicit admiration for and debt to Bede, embedded in William's history lies a profound

¹⁵ Davies, "Nations and National Identities," 574; Robert Bartlett important examination illustrates the complexities underlying "race" and "ethnicity" while analyzing medieval uses of equivalent and contiguous terms such as "gens" and "natio" relating to community formation and nation. Bartlett, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001): 39-56.

¹⁶ Rodney Thomson, *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1987), 13.

antagonism that stems from the northernness implicit in Bede's text and, consequently, in the mythos of the English people.

The “Father of English History”?

By examining specific intertextual passages between William's *Gestum Regum* and Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*—those moments for which Bede is William's only or chief informant—we see William confront the North in his source text. To say that William is sometimes at odds with Bede is not new. Scholars have pointed out William's explicit frustrations with Bede's work. Though he refers to Bede as William's “hero,” Thomson concedes that “the terms in which William habitually refers to Bede illustrate that William did indeed regard his writing as ‘authoritative’ ... yet he would not on that account prefer his dating to that given in the [Anglo-Saxon] Chronicle, and on other occasions felt free to criticize him.”¹⁷ William, then, found faults in Bede's *Historia*. In the *Gestum Pontificum*, William further criticizes Bede's account of the Archbishop of York Wilfrid's life, in which “many things are missing.”¹⁸ These local disagreements do not account, however, for the antagonism that emerges over the course of William's *Gestum Regum* and that has been ignored to this point in the textual relationship of William to Bede.

We can view this antagonism in Book I of the *Gestum Regum*, the part of William's text that covers the fifth to the early ninth centuries and thus runs most

¹⁷ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁸ “multa ex historia Bedae vacant.” *GP*, 326-27.

closely to Bede's *Historia*. Both historians chronicle the most famous story in England's religious history: that of the sixth-century English slave children in Rome, who indirectly prompt the future pope Gregory to send Christian missionaries—namely Augustine, later, of Canterbury—to England. According to Bede, Gregory wonders from where these children with such “fair complexions, handsome faces, and lovely hair” come. Shaping answers to each of his questions about the pagan children, Gregory interprets a divine mandate: on their race, called *Angli*, Gregory replies, “they have the face of angels;” on their kingdom of *deiri*, he responds, “*De ira!* good, snatched from the wrath of Christ and called to his mercy;” on the name of their king, Ælla, Gregory sings, “*Alleluia!* the praise of God the Creator must be sung in those parts.”¹⁹ Confirmed in his interpretation of these answers, Gregory then toils to send missionaries to Britain to spread Christianity. Bede explains, “I have thought it proper to insert this story into this Church History, based as it is on the tradition which we have received from our ancestors.”²⁰ For Bede, the story constitutes a seminal tale on the origins of English Christianity, but it further places at the center of this pivotal event his

¹⁹ All quotations of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (hereafter *HE*) are taken from *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). “‘Bene’ inquit; ‘nam et angelicam habent faciem ... ‘Bene’ inquit ‘Deiri, de ira eruti et ad misericordiam Christi vocati’ ... ‘Alleluia, laudem Dei Creatoris illis in partibus oportet cantari’” (Ibid., 134-35).

²⁰ “Haec iuxta opinionem, quam ab antiquis accepimus, historiae nostrae ecclesiasticae inserere opportunum duximus.” Ibid.

own homeland, Northumbria, the kingdom under which King Æthelfrith united Deira, the home of Ælla and the children, and Bernicia in the early seventh century. Bede's own monastery at Monkwearmouth lay almost at the old border between the two former kingdoms. If Bede's region is heathen, the divine potential of its people is evident in their physical beauty, so apparent that an esteemed Church father like Gregory notices it at first sight.

Placing this story prominently in his *Gestum Regum*, William de-emphasizes the Northumbrians. Rewriting the story in terms of Ælla, the Deiran king, William notes,

It was in his time that the slave-children from Northumbria, by a custom so familiar and almost ingrained among the Northumbrians that, as has been witnessed even in our own day, they did not hesitate to put their nearest and dearest on the market in hopes of some trifling profit—the children from England, as I was saying, taken to Rome for sale, provided the means for the salvation of their fellow-countrymen. Their surprising beauty and graceful forms had attracted the attention of the citizens, when among others appeared by chance the most blessed Gregory.²¹

²¹ “Huius tempore uenales ex Nothanimbria pueri—familiari scilicet et pene ingenta illi nationi consuetudine, adeo ut, sicut nostra quoque secula uiderunt, no dubitarent arctissimas necessitudines sub pretextu minimorum commodorum distrahere—venales ergo ex Anglia pueri, Romam deducti, saluti omnium compatriotarum occasionem dedere’ nam, cum miraculo uultus et liniamentorum gratia oculos ciuitatis inuitassent, affuit forte cum aliis beatissimus Gregorius.” *GR*, 60-63.

If any regional pride lies in Bede's version, William defuses it immediately. The children are, for him, only in Rome because of the barbaric practices of Northumbrians. This region's terrible slavery is not, like the story, "ancient" but rather "ingrained," an inherited practice that William claims can be witnessed "even in [his] own day." Northumbrians ignore the sanctity of kinship, putting their "nearest and dearest" on the auction block for any "trifling profit" that might be garnered. Bede conveys the sense that these children's beauty is undeniable. Yet before recounting Gregory's fascination with their splendor, William alters the context in which we hear of it. He quickly reconfigures Northumbrian slaves into the "children of England" who "[provide] the means for the salvation of all their fellow-countrymen."²² Only after purging them of their northernness does William re-tell Gregory's encounter with their "surprising beauty." By making this shift explicit with his "as I was saying," William signals a return from his northern digression to the main story. He ends the whole account by reminding his reader that the Northumbrian king Ælla, though he was "the prime cause of the Christian mission to the English people," was "not worthy ... to hear Christianity himself."²³ William cleanses the seminal narrative in English Christianity of any endearing trace of the North.

Contentiousness also mars William's encounter in Bede's text with the Northumbrian king Æthelfrith. For Bede, Æthelfrith is "a very brave king and most

²² "saluti omnium compatriotarum occasionem dedere." *GR*, 62-63.

²³ "qui, quamquam maxima occasio Christianitatis genti Anglorum fuerit, nichil umquam siue Dei consilio siue quodam infortunio de ea audire meruit." *Ibid*.

eager for glory,” who “ravaged the Britons more extensively than any other English ruler.”²⁴ Bede compares Æthelfrith to King Saul of Israel: “no ruler had subjected more land to the English race or settled it, having either exterminated or conquered the natives.”²⁵ Though Bede notes Æthelfrith’s rash behavior, the king is seen to conquer lands and put down inferior peoples like the Britons all in the name of the English. His victory over the Scots—to whom Bede refers as the Irish living in Britain—at the battle of Degsastan (c. 603) is so devastating that “no Irish king in Britain has dared to make war on the English race to this day.”²⁶ Bede’s account of Æthelfrith might be interpreted in terms of his own nationalist impulse: an English king of an English people set against Celtic others: the Britons and Irish. But we might just as well read Bede’s encomium to Æthelfrith as pro-Northumbrian. He discusses several of Æthelfrith’s exploits—the Battle of Chester, his persecution of Edwin, his death at the River Idle—but the northern battle of Degsastan is the only event of Æthelfrith’s reign mentioned in Bede’s conclusion to the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The brief annalistic recapitulation that comprises Bede’s conclusion is meant, critics believe, to highlight important events narrated throughout the main text. Of the whole recapitulation,

²⁴ “rex fortissimus et gloriae cupidissimus Aedilfrid, qui plus omnibus Anglorum primatibus gentem uastauit Brettonum.” *HE*, 116-17.

²⁵ “”nemo in regibus plures eorum terras, exterminatis uel suiugatis indigenis, aut tributarias genti Anglorum aut habitabiles fecit.” *Ibid*.

²⁶ “Neque ex eo tempore quisquam regum Scottorum in Brittania aduersus gentem Anglorum usque ad hanc diem in proelium uenire audebat.” *Ibid*.

Higham points out that “the Northumbrians were the first named of any English gens here” and that Bede, in recounting his text, “[places] the Northumbrian dynasty in a lead position within Anglo-Saxon England.”²⁷ The English people, then, are an extension of Northumbrian culture. They originate from and owe their martial dominance—not to mention their Christianity—to Northumbria.

William’s account of Æthelfrith’s reign suggests that he recognizes Bede’s regionalist tendencies, which he must rewrite. William remarks, “[Æthelfrith’s] praise indeed and that of his successors earned the attention of Bede, and Bede was particularly concerned with the Northumbrians, his own neighbors [*familiarius*], who were familiar to him because they were so near.”²⁸ William seems carefully to place Bede “near” the Northumbrians rather than “of” them. Bede, here, like William, becomes merely a neighbor to Northumbria rather than an inhabitant, and certainly not the figure most identified with the place. William subtly reclaims Bede from the North, figuratively relocating him below the Humber. The effect of William’s appropriation of Bede in this particular textual moment is to head off any implied regionalist arguments regarding the powerful Æthelfrith. For William, Æthelfrith is a strong king but not one to stand for all of England. Although Æthelfrith “zealously [defends] his own possessions,” he also “unjustly invad[es] those of others, inventing on all sides

²⁷ Higham, *Re-Reading Bede*, 88.

²⁸ “... et illius quidem in confines sibi Northanimbros eo familiarus quo propinquius prospiciebat intentio.” *GR*, 64-65.

opportunities to shine.”²⁹ William’s timely and explicit claim that Bede spends so much energy discussing Northumbrians simply because he lived near them reminds his readers that the potent king Æthelfrith is *merely* a Northumbrian as well. For William, Bede cannot help but think of Northumbrians because he was familiar with them; consequently, there is no further ideological work—no conscious “Northumbrianism”—manifesting in Bede’s text.

William’s neutralization of Bede’s northernness is nowhere more explicit than in William’s version of the early seventh-century Battle of Chester, a story again involving the Æthelfrith. Bede illustrates this battle in which the pagan Northumbrian Æthelfrith defeats a body of men from the Breton kingdoms of Gwynned and Powys.³⁰ Prior to combat with the Britons—“that nation of heretics” [*gentis perfidae*], as Bede refers to them—Æthelfrith notices a contingent of monks from the Welsh monastery at Bangor Is-Coed [*Bancornaburg*] who had arrived to pray for the Britons’ army. When Æthelfrith hears of the monks’ purpose, the king declares, according to Bede, “If they are praying to their God against us, then, even if they do not bear arms, they are fighting against us, assailing us as they do with prayers for our defeat.”³¹ Æthelfrith orders his

²⁹ “Æthelfridus igitur, ut dicere ceperam, regnum natus primo acriter sua defendere, post etiam improbe aliena inuadere, gloriae occasiones undecumque conflare.” Ibid.

³⁰ Dates for the battle range from 606 to 616, but most historians now date it between 613 and 616AD.

³¹ Ergo si adversum nos ad Deum suum clamant, profecto et ipsi, quamuis arma non ferant, contra nos pugant, qui adversis nos inprecationibus persequuntur.” *EH*, 140-41.

men to massacre the non-combatants, “about twelve hundred” [*mille ducentos*], prior to the battle’s start. The monks’ own guardsmen, led by a certain Brocmail, flee in the face of the assault, leaving the unarmed monks to the charging Northumbrians.

Though Bede notes that the Bangor monks are helpless, he offers little sympathy in their deaths. Their slaughter is, for Bede, the fulfillment of Augustine of Canterbury’s prophecy, which Bede explains as a prequel to this account. Amid strife between the Celtic and Roman churches, Augustine and Celtic representatives, largely from Bangor, agree to a conference. Bede illustrates the infamous encounter between Augustine and the Britons. As they approach the archbishop, the monks aim to judge if Augustine is “meek and lowly of heart” [*mitis et humilis corde*] by whether or not he rises to greet them. Augustine, of course, does not rise, and the enraged monks consequently “strove to contradict everything he said” [*quae dicebat contradicere laborant*] in the course of the meeting. Augustine implores them to accept and follow the rites of the holy Roman Church in favor of their own Celtic practices and to evangelize to the English, but they refuse.³² The archbishop offers a caveat: “if they refused to accept peace from their brethren, they would have to accept war from their enemies; and if they would not

³² Augustine notes three points of dispute: “to keep Easter at the proper time; to perform the sacrament of baptism... and to preach the word of the Lord to the English people in fellowship with us” (*EH*, 138-39). [*ut pascha suo tempore celebretis, ut ministerium baptizandi... ut genti Anglorum una nobiscum verbum Domoni praedicetis...*]

preach the way of life to the English nation, they would one day suffer vengeance at their hands.”³³ The prophecy is thus realized in their slaughter at Chester.

The fulfillment of Augustine’s divination leads to various interpretations of what exactly Bede is doing here. Gransden supposes that “Bede seems in this instance to prefer heathenism to non-Roman Christianity.”³⁴ Indeed, a great irony lies in Æthelfrith’s paganism, that he is as Bede states “ignorant of the divine religion.”³⁵ Surely the king is not concerned with the monks’ religious practices or their battlefield prayers to a god whom he does not recognize; rather he and his Northumbrians become unwitting instruments of God wielded against the sinful Britons. At the same time, the Northumbrians are themselves victims of Celtic indifference to their own ignorance of the Gospel, to the Britons’ unwillingness to step across borders to minister to them. Bede’s account clearly evinces a chronic enmity between the Roman and Celtic churches, which culminates in his account of the Synod at Whitby in 664.³⁶ The pagan

³³ “... si pacem cum fratribus accipere nollent, bellum ab hostibus forent accepturi, et si nationi Anglorum nolvisset viam vitae praedicare, per horum manus ultionem essent mortis passuri.” *EH*, 140-41.

³⁴ Gransden, *Historical Writing in England* vol. 1, 20.

³⁵ “quod divinae erat religionis ignarus.” *HE*, 116-17.

³⁶ The synod, presided over by King Oswiu of Northumbria, comprised official arguments, largely on the dating of Easter, between representatives of the Celtic church and Roman church. Archbishop of Northumbria Colman presented the Celtic argument and was opposed by Wilfrid. The Roman argument won the day, which meant that the Northumbrian church officially and universally adopted Roman rites and practices.

English's conversion to Roman Christianity is inevitable—conversion in Northumbria actually follows Æthelfrith's reign with the coming of King Edwin. Bede leaves us with a sense that, although this particular band of English is pagan at the moment, they will eventually choose Christianity (with no help from the Britons)—and the *right* Christianity at that. At the same time, Alfred Smyth labels Bede's justification of the slaughter as “racist,” and we might interpret Bede's Chester rendering as a moment where Christian brotherhood takes a backseat to the *gens Anglorum*.³⁷ Like the Battle of Degsastan, the Britons' death explicitly serves the cause of Englishness set against the Celtic other.

More specifically, however, the Chester narrative gestures towards a regionalist imperative in Bede's work. Gransden argues of the butchery at Chester that Bede's revelry at the Britons' demise is “no doubt ... influenced by his loyalty to the Northumbrians and his belief that a strong Northumbria was ultimately to the church's advantage.”³⁸ Bede concludes of the monks, “those heretics would also suffer the vengeance of temporal death because they had despised the offer of everlasting salvation,” but he leaves unsaid what he clearly believes: that the Britons would meet

Colman and the Celtic contingent retired to Iona in lasting disagreement, their positions in the Northumbrian church taken by new men including, eventually, Wilfrid himself. See *EH*, 296-308.

³⁷ Alfred Smyth, “The Emergence of English Identity, 700-1000,” *Studies in Ethnic Identity and National Perspectives in Medieval Europe*, ed. Alfred Smyth (London: MacMillan, 1998), 31.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

“everlasting” suffering due expressly to their sins.³⁹ More than simple transgressors, the Britons are bad neighbors. They judge Augustine’s Christian earnestness by arbitrary physical mannerisms—his failure to rise for the Bangor monks is by most accounts not intended as a slight—and, worse, they refuse to minister to the Northumbrians near their monastery.⁴⁰ The monks’ passive refusal constitutes hostility, an active deliverance of those same Northumbrians to the frightening eternity the Bangor brethren are themselves made to confront. Implicitly, therefore, Bede’s account intimates Northumbrian vengeance and asserts Northumbrian strength, even superiority, with and without the Divine.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing of Chester in the 1130s, only selectively follows Bede’s account in his pro-Welsh *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Geoffrey adds that the Bangor abbot Dinoot “proved to [Augustine] on a whole series of grounds that they owed him no allegiance at all,” and that the English to whom Augustine compelled them to preach the gospel had “persisted in depriving them of their own fatherland.”⁴¹

³⁹ “... ut etiam temporalis interitus ultione / sentirent perfidi, quod oblata sibi perpetuae salutis consilia spreuerant.” *EH*, 142-43.

⁴⁰ Bede’s words describing the archbishop’s failure to stand make explicit its randomness: “Now it happened that Augustine remained seated while they were coming in” [factumque est ut venientibus illis sederet Augustinus in sella]. *HE*, 138-39.

⁴¹ “qui augustino petenti ab episcopis britonum subiectionem. & suadenti ut secum genti anglorum communem euangelizandi laborem susciperent. diversis monstraui argumentationibus ipsos ei nullam ei nullam subiectionem debere. nec suam predicationem inimicis suis impendere ... & gens saxonum patriam propriam eisdem

Portraying the English as aggressors against victimized Britons, Geoffrey claims that the monks' refusal to evangelize compels Ethelbert, King of Kent to stir up the other "petty kings," including Æthelfrith, against the Britons. Only after defeating the Britons' army does Æthelfrith discover the Bangor monks within the city. Hearing that they came there to pray for his army's destruction "he immediately let his soldiery loose against them" and, thus, "twelve hundred monks won the crown of martyrdom and assured themselves of a seat in heaven."⁴² As we might expect, Geoffrey's reworking of Bede disparages the English and particularly the Northumbrians. They are mere brutes performing the dirty work of the Kentish king. Geoffrey portrays the Welsh nation against that of Bede's English.

Surprisingly, William of Malmesbury's reworking of the battle of Chester echoes Geoffrey's more clearly than it does Bede's. In contrasting Bede as Geoffrey does, however, William counteracts not Bede's nationalism but Bede's regionalism.⁴³

auferre perstarent." *The Historia Regum Britannia of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Acton Griscom (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1929), 509.

⁴² "At ethelfridus civitate capta. cum intellexisset causam adventus predictorum monachorum. iussit in eos primum arma verti. & sic mille ducenti eorum in ipsa die martirio decorati. regni celstis adepti sunt sedem." Ibid., 510.

⁴³ William and Geoffrey ironically shared the same patron in Robert Earl of Gloucester, the illegitimate son of Henry I and half-brother to Matilda. Though noted as a vigorous leader, David Crouch argues, "His policy was simply to build on his natural affinity in the west country, to grab territorial power, and beat down any local rivals." Crouch notes that Robert "set the pattern of regional political disintegration that plagued

Though William lacks affection for the Britons, he significantly curtails his account of Chester, overwriting Bede's version in an attempt to curb the death that overwhelms Bede's history. William's narrative engages specifically and antagonistically with Bede's, unlike Geoffrey's, which uses Bede with other sources, Henry of Huntingdon's, which lifts Bede's account in full with no change, and Geffrei of Gaimar's, which follows exactly the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s version of the battle.⁴⁴ William writes the battle itself in one nearly bloodless sentence: "The king ambushed [the Britons] and put them to flight, venting his frustration first of all on the monks, who had gathered in crowds to pray for the success of the army."⁴⁵ William's negation of Bede's detailed account includes emptying the Northumbrian cause of any martial or religious justification. In Bede's telling, Æthelfrith meets Celtic soldiers [*militis*], yet in William's the Northumbrian king "ambushes" [*insidiis*] the "townsmen ... rushing out

England between 1138 and 1154": David Crouch, "Robert, first earl of Gloucester (*b.* before 1100, *d.* 1147)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23716/> (accessed 1 April 2009).

⁴⁴ In the entry AD 606, the Chronicle notes: "Aethelfrith led his army to Chester and there killed a countless number of Welsh; and thus was fulfilled Augustine's prophecy which he spoke: 'If the Welsh do not want peace with us, they shall perish at the hands of the Saxons.' There was also killed 200 priests who had come there in order to pray for the Welsh raiding-army. Their chieftan was called Scrocmail, who escaped from there as one of fifty." *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 22.

⁴⁵ "... quos ille insidiis exceptos fudit fugavitque, prius in monachos debachatus qui pro salute exercitus supplicaturi frequentes convenerant." *GR*, 64-65.

to battle in disorder” [*oppidani ... effuse in bellum ruunt*] to rebuff an inevitable siege of their city.⁴⁶ William admits empathy for these *oppidani* who die at the hands of the cruel Northumbrians because they would “endure anything rather than a siege” [*qui omnia perpeti quam obsidionem mallent*].⁴⁷ He lends further compassion to the Bangor monks themselves. No mention is made of their meeting with Augustine thus muting Bede’s implication that the monks’ slaughter is Divine punishment or even Northumbrian vengeance. According to William, the pagan king massacres them for their Christian prayers against his army.

William offers a second sentence specifically to the doomed brethren of Bangor: “Their numbers would seem incredible in our own day, as is evident from the ruined walls of churches in the monastery nearby, the complex arcading, and all that great pile of ruins, such as you would hardly find elsewhere.”⁴⁸ The passage correlates with Bede’s earlier commentary on the size of Bangor Is-Coed. Bede claims of the monastery, “when it was divided into seven parts ... no division had less than 300 men.”⁴⁹ While for Bede the monastery’s vastness merely complements the number of monks who die at Chester, for William the description of the monastery precludes their

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “Quorum incredibilem nostra aetate numerum fuisse inditio sunt in vicino cenobio tot semiruti parietes aecclesiarum, to anfractus porticum, tanta turba rudrum quantum vix alibi cernas...” Ibid.

⁴⁹ “ut cum in septem portioned esset cum praepositis sibi rectoribus monasterium diuisum, nulla harum portio minus quam trecentos homines haberet.” *HE*, 141.

massacre and allows him to look past the corpses in the foreground of Bede's account to the symbolic ruins of the monastery that they once inhabited. William's narrative is probably shaped by his own visit to the site at Bangor-Is-Coed, but his brief illustration of the abbey's contemporary rubble does greater ideological work.

Bede's regionalism, perpetrated through violence and his silence regarding the monks' final damnation—unlike Geoffrey's account, the monks are not said to achieve “a seat in Heaven”—leaves Christian bodies symbolically un-interred on the fields of Chester and in his own pages. Bede's refusal to speak the symbolic death of the Britons, granting them neither the eternal bliss of Heaven nor the everlasting torture of Hell, leaves them merely physically dead. Their slaughter exposes the regionalist underbelly of Bede's English history: a trace of northern independence, power, and barbarity that runs counter to any ideas of a unified Englishness. The monks' bodies point toward the northernness—or “lack” of Englishness—inherent in Bede's text. William's reaction in his own work suggests his awareness of the incident's gravity in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Bede's account of the battle proves one of the darkest moments in the *Ecclesiastica Historia*. Further, it contributes to a generally macabre undercurrent in text as a whole. Gransden tellingly finds in Bede's history a “touch of morbidity ... Bede likes to write of prophecies of death, visions of the afterworld, death-bed scenes, coffins and corpses.”⁵⁰ This death-effect in Bede accents some of the notable northern moments in his history, moments that William of Malmesbury finds terrifying.

⁵⁰ Gransden, *Historical Writing in England* vol. 1, 18.

Northernness is, thus, intertwined with a traumatic focus on death at work in Bede's text.

In his revulsion, William flees to the now-ruinous monastery at Bangor Is-Coed when he overwrites Bede's Chester narrative in two sentences. The absence of the monks' vehemence towards Augustine redeems them of their fatal sin in Bede, and William points to the monks' remarkable numbers, not in slaughter but as testified to by the astounding size of their abbey ruins. He inters the monks symbolically within the very stone walls they once inhabited. The monks' rest solemnly in William's text, and their textual burial closes the bloody space of a spectral North. The traumatic death element in Bede's history briefly vanishes.

The Harried North

Even after Chester, however, death and the North remain intertwined for William. He makes the connection himself. Later in Book I of the *Gestum Regum* he conflates Bede's eighth-century Northumbria in the golden age of monasticism with the twelfth-century wasteland of the North, still smoldering from the devastation of the Conqueror's horrific campaign of 1069-70, the so-called "harrying of the North." Specifically, William ponders Bede's origins

in [England's] most distant region, not far from Scotland ... a district once fragrant with religious houses as a garden is with flowers, and brilliant with many cities of the Romans' building; but now made

wretched by the Danes of old or Normans in our own day, it offers
nothing that can much attract us.⁵¹

Bede's *patria*, the place from which emerged the seminal history of the English people now contributes "nothing ... much" to the realm. William's "us" here denotes, it seems, the rest of England excluding the North. As before, it is likely that William travelled to northern England, where he witnessed the remnants of the Conqueror's devastation first hand. Higham calls the Conqueror's crusade of 1069 "perhaps the most destructive single campaign in England's history."⁵² In "harrying" the North, the Conqueror responded to apparent plots for his overthrow between the people of the North, Edgar Ætheling (the English claimant to the throne) and the Danish king Swein II. In a remarkable deathbed confession, King William is said to have testified to the devastation brought upon the northern population:

In mad fury I descended on the English of the north like a raging lion,
and ordered that their homes and crops with all their equipment and
furnishings should be burnt at once and their great flocks and herds of
sheep and cattle slaughtered everywhere. So I chastised a great multitude

⁵¹ "... in remotissima... Scottiae propinquum. Plaga, olim et suave halantibus monasteriorum floribus dulcis et urbium a Romanis edificatarum frequentia renidens, nunc vel antiquo Danorum vel recenti Normannorum populatu lugubris, nichil quod animos multum allitiat pretendit." *GR*, 82-83.

⁵² N.J. Higham, *The Kingdom of Northumbria, AD 350-1100* (Wolfboro Falls, NH: A. Sutton, 1993), 232.

of men and women with the lash of starvation and, alas! was the cruel murderer of many thousands, both young and old.⁵³

The sheer brutality of the campaign—the Conqueror admittedly moved to animal rage, the murder of men, women, and children, the burning of all arable land in northeast England, the slaughter of all livestock—suggests that it was an effort not merely to subdue the sense of northern autonomy but to destroy it completely.

William's second account of this "harried" North proves more telling. In Book III of the *Gestum Regum*, William witnesses,

a province once fertile and a nurse of tyrants was hamstrung by fire, rapine, and bloodshed; the ground for sixty miles and more left entirely uncultivated, the soil quite bare even down to this day. As for the cities once so famous, the towers whose tops threatened the sky, the fields rich in pasture and watered by rivers, if any one sees them now, he sighs if he

⁵³ "Vnde immoderato furore commotus in boreales Anglos ut uesanus leo properauit domos eorum iussi segetesque et omnem apparatus atque supellectilem confestim incendi, et copiosos armentorum pecudumque greges passim mactari. Multitudinem itaque utriusque sexus tam diræ famis mucrone multauit. et sic multa milia pulcherrimæ gentis senum iuuenumque prohi dolor funestus trucidauit." *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, vol. 4, 6 vols., ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 94-95.

is a stranger, and if he is a native surviving from the past, he does not recognize them.⁵⁴

The sight of the North's destruction compels the visitor to sigh, but worse, the native will not even know his own homeland. And this is perhaps the point. The Conqueror desired that no invading army might "nurse" itself on the abundance of the North, so he burned the province to the ground along with the ground itself.

The severity of his "harrying" aimed to sunder any remnant of identity between the contemporary region and its long history of rebellion, particularly its identification as the former kingdom of Northumbria. Just as William divorces Bede from Northumbria when Bede speaks of the powerful King Æthelfrith, his commentary here seems hopeful that northerners will not recognize this rebellious past, that they will divorce themselves from the North and conform to the sovereign rule of a Norman king. The "harrying" set back the region nearly a century and left the North quite literally devoid of life.⁵⁵ Twelfth-century historiographers, including William, come to know

⁵⁴ "... provinciae quondam fertilis et tyrannorum nutriculae incendio, preda, sanguine nervi succisi; humus per sexaginta et eo amplius miliaria omnifariam inculta; nudum omnium solum usque ad hoc etiam tempus. Urbes olim preclaras, turres proceritate sua in caelum minantes, agros laetos pascuis irriguos fluuiis, si quis modo videt peregrinus, ingemit; si quis superest vetus incola, non agnoscit." *GR*, 464-65

⁵⁵ *The Domesday Book* of 1086 notes roughly 800 villas, nearly fifty percent of all villas) in Yorkshire as being waste or partly waste. *The Domesday Book: A Complete Translation*, eds. Ann Williams and G. H. Martin (London: Penguin, 1992), 785-881; for a study of "waste" entries in *Domesday Book* see *The Domesday Geography of*

and view the region through the guise of this dead land, a haunting presence still bound up with the North's turbulent history and its precarious geographic position. For William the devastation brought on by the Conqueror seems only to enhance the spectrality of the North. As William plainly states of the Northumbrians: "Freedom or death was their tradition,"⁵⁶ and, for him, the harried North becomes a gaping hole in the landscape of the realm that threatens to swallow Englishness altogether.

In William's illustrations of the Battle of Chester and of the "harried" North, there emerges a tendency to negate human death with decaying man-made structures. As the remains of the Bangor monastery bear witness to the great number of monks who lived there, the remains of the northern cities, built by Romans, testify to the long-dead monks of that "fragrant ... and brilliant" region of the past. Though William's imagery seems to do justice to the plight of the region, comparisons to other accounts of

Northern England, ed. H. C. Darby and I. S. Maxwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 59-70.

⁵⁶ "a maioribus didicisse aut libertatem aut mortem." *GR* 364; William illustrates, in one of many examples, the Northumbrians' inherent independence when he speaks of Earl Tostig's expulsion from Northumbria by its natives in 1065. William recounts these Northumbrians' defense made to Harold Godwin, after his brother's overthrow: "The Northumbrians ... defended what they had done before him, maintaining that, being born and bred as free men, they could not brook harsh treatment from any superior; freedom or death was their tradition" (*GR*, 364-65). [Nothanimbri, licet non inferiores numero essent, tamen quieti consulentes factum apud eum excusant: se homines libere natos, libere educatos, nullius ducis ferotiam pati posse; a maioribus didicisse aut libertatem aut mortem.]

the “harried” North suggest the uniqueness of his approach. William’s contemporary Orderic Vitalis laments of the North that “so terrible a famine fell upon the humble and defenseless populace that more than 100,000 Christian folk of both sexes, young and old alike, perished with hunger.”⁵⁷ Another of William’s contemporaries, Symeon of Durham, offers an even more compelling description in his *Historia Regum* (c. 1129):

so great a famine prevailed that men compelled to hunger, devoured human flesh, that of horses, dogs, and cats, and whatever custom abhors; others sold themselves to perpetual slavery ... others, while about to go into exile from the country, fell down in the middle of their journey and gave up the ghost. It was horrific to behold human corpses decaying in the houses, the streets, and the roads, swarming with worms.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Vnde sequenti tempore tam gravis in Anglia late seuit penuria, et inermem ac simplicem populum tanta famis inuoluit miseria, ut christianæ gentis utriusque sexus et omnis ætatis homines perirent plus quam centum milia.” Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 2, 231-33.

⁵⁸ Translation is taken from Simeon of Durham, *A History of the Kings of England*, trans. J. Stephenson (Dyfed: Llanerch Enterprises, 1987), 137. “... adeo fames prævaluit, ut homines humanas, quines, caninas, et catinas carnes ... alii vero in servitutem perpetuam sese venderent ... alii extra patriam profecturi in exilium, medio itinere deficientes animas emisierunt. Erat horror ad intuendum per domos, plateas, et itinera cadavera humana dissolvi, et tabescentia putredine cum fœtore horrendo scaturire vermibus.” *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*. vol. 2, *Historia Regum*. ed. Thomas Arnold (London: Longmans & Co., 1885), 188.

Both accounts differ notably from William's in their attention to the human costs of the "harrying."⁵⁹ Orderic notes the sheer number of lives "young and old" starved to death, and Symeon's physiological testimony—bodily hunger, exhaustion, and human decay—distinctly contrasts with William's interest in the crumbling manufactured symbols of the North—"cities of the Romans' building," "famous ... towers" and "cultivated" fields. These accounts portray the North as one ghostly topography, a scene of uncannily unburied bodies physically starved, burned, bashed, stabbed, and trampled to death yet symbolically un-interred and left to haunt the geographical and historical landscape. William seems figuratively to bury the dead men, women, and children into the soil of their plowed fields and into the structures they once built and inhabited. Like the ground at Chester in Bede's narrative, the landscape Symeon presents amounts to a corpse field, but just as with the Chester episode, William retreats to stone rubble. If Bede "likes to write of prophecies of death, visions of the afterworld, death-bed scenes,

⁵⁹ William of Malmesbury may have known Symeon's text. See Donald Matthew, "Durham and the Anglo-Norman World", *Anglo-Norman Durham 1093-1193*, ed. David Rollason, M. Harvey, and M. Prestwich (Woodbridge, 1994), 1-22. Matthew suggests that Williams employs Symeon's *Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius hoc est Dunelmensis ecclesie* as a source for parts of Book II of *the Gestum Pontificum* (GP, 266-76). See also Thomson's note on Book I.61.4 in William of Malmesbury, *Gestum Regum Anglorum: General Introduction and Commentary Vol. 2*, 2 vols., ed. R.M. Thomson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 52.

coffins and corpses,”⁶⁰ William ignores mortality by displacing death into the ruinous monuments and crumbling edifices dotting the English landscape.

Ruinous Preoccupations: Beyond the North

These monuments that William of Malmesbury seeks —the wreckage of Bangor-Is-Coed and the Roman towers of the North’s once great cities— allow him to repress the horror of death linked with northernness. Nowhere is this attention to wrecked things more clear than in William’s full citation of his contemporary Hildebert of Tours’ poem “Par tibi Roma nihil,” a thirty-six line elegy on Rome’s classical past as witnessed in its medieval ruins. Thomson observes, “This poem is a noble lament on Rome’s fall and present ruinous and anarchic state contrasted with its former grandeur.”⁶¹ The ruins are a lesson “in Rome’s past greatness,” but there is now “no possibility of restoration.”⁶² The decline of Rome is a great blow to William personally. He felt profoundly indebted to classical writing, as his quotations of the *Aeneid* throughout the *Gestum Regum* testify.⁶³ Classical Roman authors largely shaped his prose style. William explains, for example, in the prologue to Book I of the *Gestum Regum* that he aims to “give a Roman

⁶⁰ See note 49 above.

⁶¹ Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, 30.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *GR*, 612-13. William, in fact, quotes the *Aeneid* here, as he cites Hildebert, in his description of noble Romans of the past, “lords of the world, those who the toga wore” [Romanis olim rerum dominis genteque togata] that contrast the “inactive men” of Rome’s present. See *Aeneid* I.282.

polish to the rough annals of our native speech.”⁶⁴ Thomson sees in the poem a “key” to “William’s psychology,” an explanation as to why William devoted such time and space to the classical readings that made him “exceptional in his time.”⁶⁵ But, as I have already shown, William’s ruinous preoccupations extend beyond Rome, and I suggest here that these previous moments in his history better inform his attention to Hildebert’s poem.

The poem begins:

In ruins all, yet still beyond compare,
How great thy prime, though provest overthrown.
Age hath undone thy pride: see, weltering there,
Heaven’s temples, Caesar’s palace quite, quite down.
Down is the masterpiece (Araxes dire
Feared while it stood, yet grieved to see it fall),
Which sworded kings and senate’s wise empire
And Heaven did stablish sovereign of us all.
Caesar to have her for his private ends
All loyalties, all kindred set at naught.
By threefold arts she grew: foes, crimes, and friends
By arms, laws, gold she vanquished, tamed, and bought.

⁶⁴ “... exarata barbarice Romano sale condire.” *GR*, 14-15.

⁶⁵ Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, 30.

Raised with unsleeping toil by men of old,

By generous strangers helped and neighbouring wave—⁶⁶

Julius Caesar stands as the pivotal figure here, signifying at once world domination and Rome's internal implosion. Though Rome does not fall in the wake of his own failed powerplay, his figure gestures unwittingly toward all that will come. The palace of the Caesars is thrown under "Heaven's temples," its ruin foreseen in Julius' undoing of "all loyalties, all kindred" for "his private ends" and power lust. Julius plants a seed that sprouts "friends" but also "foes [and] crimes." The poem wrestles with the remnants of man's near-Faustian aspirations, notably Caesar's, lamenting the state of a great city "in ruins yet still beyond compare." At the same time, the poem reasserts this sinful vanity, venerating man's capacity to "make of Rome a city higher/ Than toiling gods could wholly overthrow." In illustrating man's ability to supersede the creative capacities of the gods—"These sculpted gods the gods themselves amaze"—C. Stephen Jaeger claims that the poem "posits the victory of representation over nature," that it is about

⁶⁶ "Par tibi, Roma, nichil, cum sis prope tota ruina; / quam magni fueris integra, fracta doces. / Longa tuos fastus aetas destruxit: et arces / Cesaris et superum templa palude iacent. / Ille labor, labor ille ruit quem dirus Araxes / et stantem tremuit et cecidisce dolet; / Quem gladii regum, quem provida iura senatus, / quem superi rerum constituere caput; / quem magis optauit cum crimine solus habere / Cesar quam sotius et pius esse socer; / qui crescens studiis tribus hostes, crimen, amicos / ui domuit, secuit legibus, emit ope; / in quem, dum fieret, uigilavit cura priorum, / iuuit opus pietas hospitis, unda locum." *GR*, 612-16.

“overcoming and going beyond mimesis.”⁶⁷ As though challenging Nature (and by implication God), the poet claims that “man creative doth deify,” that “art” or man’s “toil” “makes these gods and not divinity.”

William’s own lamenting language in introducing the poem, however, suggests a very different register. Rome, “once mistress of the world and now ... more like a small town,” serves as the dwelling for “the most inactive of mankind, who put justice on the scales against gold and set a price on canon law.”⁶⁸ Hildebert’s poem appears in William’s text just as William touches upon the events of the First Crusade amidst the political discord within Rome between Pope Urban II and Guibert (known as the Antipope Clement III) and their factions. More interestingly, however, these events proceed, in Book IV of the *Gestum Regum*, from what has already been a sustained biography of the second Norman king of England, William II (hereafter Rufus), whose reign dissolves into vanity, thievery, and ultimate tragedy. If we view Rome as signifying England, as William suggests we should, then its reduction from a global empire to a “small town” can be seen to prophesy England’s own regression from a emergent nation-state to a collection of dissimilar provinces not unlike the heptarchy of kingdoms in Bede’s own time. As we have seen, William’s ruinous obsessions reach far

⁶⁷ C. Stephen Jaeger, “Charismatic Body—Charismatic Text,” *Exemplaria* 9, no. 1 (1997): 119.

⁶⁸ “... quae quondam domina orbis terrarum, nunc... videtur oppidum exiguum, et de Romanis... nunc dicuntur hominum inertissimi, auro trutinantes iustitiam, pretio venditantes canonum regulum...” *GR*, 612-13.

beyond simple aesthetics, or his own capabilities as a historiographer or classicist, to moments of real political volatility and devastation. More than simply telling us about William's inclinations to classical literature, his use of the Roman elegy crystallizes his correlation of ruins, death, and his fears for the future of the English. William's subtle, even unconscious, associations of England with Rome at various points in his history—some obvious, but others strange—suggest that the ruins in the poem mask a terrifying reality that William is not ready to confront. In this way the poem becomes not merely an elegy on the end of the classical age but a precursor to the ruin of England itself.

Again, Hildebert's poem arrives in Book IV of the *Gestum Regum*, dedicated, as William reminds us just a few sentences before the poem appears, to the Conqueror's son and heir, William Rufus. Noting a particularly vigorous scene in Rufus' life, a scene described not long before the elegy, William claims that "the soul of Julius Caesar pass[ed] into King William [Rufus]." ⁶⁹ Ambiguously both a complement and a curse,

⁶⁹ "Sed non erat ei tantum studii uel otii ut liteteras um quam audiret ... immo calor mentis ingenitus et conscia uirtus"; "anima Iulii Cesaris transierit in regem Willelmum." *GR*, 566-67; In responding to the siege at Le Mans, which he had recently added to his holdings due to his brother Robert's fleeing Normandy to crusade, Rufus defied a sea storm and sped across the Channel to aid the town. Rufus relieved the town and captured the enemy leader, a certain Helias, who defiantly derided Rufus: "You have captured me by chance ... if only I could get away, I know what I should do." Rufus, then releases him, claiming, "I give you free leave to do your worst ... If you beat me, I shall ask for no quarter in exchange for letting you go like this." As William points out, Lucan recounts just such an action by Julius Caesar, but as William says,

Caesar's presence "within" the English king is retroactively reinterpreted by Hildebert's poem wherein Caesar is a figure of both power and self-destruction. Rufus' reign, as William recounts it, suffers from a series of misfortunes, many of which are self-inflicted. Given its context, the poem intimates William's anxiety about his nation's self-destructive tendencies, and the poem becomes another example of sublime ruins to which William retreats.

William hints at Rufus' problematic reign to come in his prologue to Book IV, where he expresses anxiety that "truth is often disastrous and falsehood profitable, for in writing of contemporaries it is dangerous to criticize."⁷⁰ He even claims to shrink from the task altogether, only finally reengaging with his work after the goading of several of his friends: "Quickened therefore by the encouragement of those whom I love ... I set to work."⁷¹ Following the prologue, William begins Book IV and his discourse on Rufus with a rather dark portrait:

Rufus, "never had either the interest or the leisure to pay any attention to literature." Rufus is not blamed here however. William equates it to Rufus' "innate fire of mind, and conscious valor" (*GR*, 563-67). [Veruntamen sunt quaedam de rege preclaræ magnanimitatis exempla.... 'Fortuitu' inquit 'me cepisti; sed si possem euadere, noui quid facerem'.... Concedo tibi ut fatias quicquid poteris, et ... si me uiceris, pro hâ uenia tecum paciscar.]

⁷⁰ "naufregatur veritas et suffragatur falsitas; quippe presentium mala periculose." *GR*, 540-41.

⁷¹ "Illorum itaque quos penitus' reposito amore diligo hortatibus animatus assurgo..." *GR*, 540-41.

Long was the world in doubt which way his character at length would turn and settle. At the beginning of his reign, while Archbishop Lanfranc was still living, he refrained from all wrongdoing ... On Lanfranc's death, for some time he showed himself changeable, virtue and vice equally balanced; but now in his later years all his love of virtue grew cold, while the heat of viciousness boiled up within him.⁷²

Depicting Rufus as a young man of promise given over in his later life to treachery, William claims that the young king "respected God too little, and man not at all."⁷³ He proceeds then to narrate Rufus' great decline: depletion of the royal treasury due to his opulence, civil discord and outright sedition due to his heavy taxes, and simple "arrogance or rather ignorance towards God."⁷⁴

Writing about various "visions and prophecies that foreshadowed the king's violent death,"⁷⁵ William points out that Rufus ultimately dies when shot through the breast by the arrow of one of his own hunting companions. The promising king is ironically the victim of a terrible accident in New Forest. His unwitting assassin's name

⁷² "Diu dubitauit mundus quo tandem uergeret, quo se inclinaret indoles illius. Inter initia, uiuente Lanfranco archiepiscopop, ab omni crimine abhoreebat, ut unicum fore regum speculum speraretur; quo defuncto, aliquandiu uarium se pretitit aequali lance uitiorum atque uirtutum; iam uero postremis annis omni gelante studio uirtutum, uitiorum in eo calor efferbuit." *GR*, 554-55.

⁷³ "quia iste parum Deum reuerbatur, nichil homines." *GR*, 554-55.

⁷⁴ "Insolentiae uel potius inscientiae contra Deum." *GR*, 562-63.

⁷⁵ "Multa de ipsius nece et previsa et predicta homines serunt ..." *GR*, 572-73.

is Tirel, a Frenchman whom the king encouraged to come to England. When the hunters come upon the king's body, they all flee, "some fortifying their own places of refuge, some in secret carrying off spoils they could, some looking about them every moment for a new king."⁷⁶ The fallen king is left dangling from his horse, later to be carried off by various country folk on a common cart to Winchester "with blood dripping freely the whole way."⁷⁷ The land itself seems to swallow up the sovereign family, for William also notes that Rufus' brother, Richard, died by sickness caught from breathing the "foggy and corrupted air" ["tabidi aeris nebula"] of New Forest, and Rufus' nephew, William, was hanged there when his horse ran underneath a branch. On the repetitious regicide by northerners, William claims that the North "brooks no master," and Rufus' death adumbrates for post-Conquest England eerily similar and unwitting regicidal tendencies, internal political dissension, and religious indifference.⁷⁸ William's England uncannily echoes the North's self-destructive history.

⁷⁶ "pars receptacula sua munire, pars furtivas predas agere, pars regem nouum iamiamque circumspicere." *GR*, 574-75.

⁷⁷ "cruore undatim per totam uiam stillante." *GR*, 574-75.

⁷⁸ In Book I of his *Gestum Regum*, William of Malmesbury recounts a letter by Alcuin to Offa, king of the Mercians. Alcuin makes note of the particular disgust of his patron, the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne, for the kingdom of Northumbria, from which he had "withdrawn his generous gifts, and was so angry with that perverse and perfidious people ... who assassinate their lords ... that unless I had pleaded for them, he would by now had taken from them all the good, and done them all the evil, that he could" (*GR*, 107). [...retracta donorum largitate, in tantum iratus est contra gentem

Repression and Reckoning

We might explain William's own obsession with ruins through two very different points of view concerning the larger medieval attention to Rome's material remains. In an inconspicuous footnote, Jacob Burckhardt mentions William's quotation of "Par tibi Roma nihil," a poem Burckhardt calls "one of the most singular examples of humanistic enthusiasm in the first half of the twelfth century."⁷⁹ This reference comes as a surprise given Burckhardt's centrality to the characterization of the Middle Ages as "diachronically innocent" of, or historically naïve about, their classical past.

Burckhardt's seminal study, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), illustrated for generations of scholars the ways in which the ruins of ancient Rome

illam, ut ait, perfidam et peruersam et homicidam dominorum suorum, peiorem eam paganis estimans, ut, nisi ego intercessor essem pro ea, quicquid eis boni abstrahere potuisset et mali machinari, iam fecisset.] William adds to this account, "for most of the kings of Northumbria had ... come to a bad end which seemed almost hereditary. In the absence of a ruler for three and thirty years, the province lay exposed to the mockery and pillage of its neighbours" (Ibid., 109). [plerosque enim regum Northanimbrorum familiari pene exitio uitam exisse. Ita cessante rectore per triginta tres annos, prouintia illa risui et predae finitimis fuit.] These passages illustrate the troubling identity of Northumbria, what will become later the North, in medieval England. Once worthy of Charlemagne's veneration, the region repeatedly implodes, literally undoing its identity through the murder of its sovereigns. This repetitious self-destructive impulse exposes the kingdom to invasion by its neighbors, those rival states and peoples poised to strike at its borders.

⁷⁹ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (New York: Macmillan, 1904), 177, n.1.

aroused the passions of numerous intellectuals and artists who instigated a new cultural epoch, the Renaissance. As Jennifer Summit carefully points out, Burckhardt explains the Middle Ages as a “period of suspended historicity,” an age “[w]hose response to the classical past was at best ignorant and forgetful, and at worst iconoclastically repressive.”⁸⁰ However, in opposing this Medieval-Renaissance divide, Summit engages specifically with medieval readings of the ruins at Rome, including Petrarch’s “Letter to Colonna,” the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, and Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*. She argues that rather than confirming medieval ignorance toward, and repression of, the classical past, these texts “represent historical change as a form of conversion that did not so much destroy or supplant the past as conserve its outward forms while assigning them new meanings.”⁸¹ In turning “the visible signs of pagan Rome into vital evidence for a material history of Christianity,”⁸² Summit argues that these texts situate the Middle Ages as a period every bit as capable as the Renaissance of contemplating historical change and Christian futurity. William of Malmsebury is liminally situated between Burckhardt’s illustration of the medieval as historically naïve and Summit’s illustration of a more humanistically-inflected gaze on Rome’s topography.

⁸⁰ Jennifer Summit, "Topography as Historiography: Petrarch, Chaucer, and the Making of Medieval Rome," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 2 (2000): 213, 212.

⁸¹ Ibid., 214.

⁸² Ibid.

In Burckhardtian fashion, William looks through the rubble he foregrounds as a sublime object to the past beauty of a monastic community at Bangor, a religiously fervent and neo-Roman Northumbria, and to Rome itself as the epitome of civilization. At the same time, he has already redefined these ruins, though not in the positive terms of Summit's equation. Instead, they function as symptoms of his anxiety about the self-destructive drives inherent in the English national community. If the ruins in William's text serve as a repressive device through which he maintains the illusion of Englishness, the ruins at Rome turn uncannily into the signifier of that community's impossibility and implosion.

Like the Roman ruins of Hildebert's poem, the North confronts William of Malmesbury with a self-destructive impulse that subsists in autonomy rather than community. The North's haunting violence and perfidiousness, of which Bede's history reminds William and us, scars the English landscape in the form of the harried North. And much like the ruins of Bangor-Is-Coed or those at Rome, the North in William's period constitutes both an empty space and a reminder of the devastating and crippling effects of internal discord. William labors to negate Bede's text and deaden the northern specter in his own history. But like the return of the repressed, the North gestures towards a discord that inevitably infects the realm as a whole. If William aims to repress this frightening realization by reflecting on the ruins at Rome, his anxieties are realized nonetheless in the years following the completion of his text, when Henry I died and

England plunged into civil war as Henry's daughter Matilda and his nephew Stephen of Blois fought for the crown.

The self-destructive discord that William feared within the realm was recreated on a much smaller stage within the medieval universities in the centuries following William's death. Born out of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the institutions of Oxford and Cambridge came to symbolize an emergent English realm, but it is their own peculiar intra-institutional definition of the term "nation" that comes to threaten not only the universities themselves, but the very sense of community—of nation—as it developed in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

Chapter Two

“The Stylus and the Sword: Defining “Nation” in the Medieval English Universities”

In the previous chapter, I examined the ways in which the North of England as a pariah and a spectral presence within the realm problematized appeals to a distinct English community, to an emergent English nation. In the twelfth-century histories of William of Malmesbury, we witness the naissance of a conscious cultural and political North-South divide. Now I will look at this phenomenon as it played out on the figurative and too-often literal battlefields of the medieval English universities over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Indeed, in this context, we encounter the confused state of the very word “nation” itself. Nation, or “nacion,” is most often employed in Middle English to infer race or family as opposed to its modern invocation of a political or sovereign state. The division of scholars by this emotionally charged identifier—nation—in the medieval universities provoked numerous confrontations born of a heightened sense of regional identity, even if these students were, at Oxford and Cambridge, far-flung from their own *patrias*.

In his exhaustive history of the University of Oxford, seventeenth-century antiquarian Anthony Wood describes several violent conflicts among Oxford’s students in the Middle Ages. For instance, in 1319:

In the vigils of S. Kenelm, King and Martyr, fell out in the evening a most grievous Conflict between the Northern and Southern Clerks: the

former of which being in pursuit of the other in Catstreet, it hapned that one Luke de Horton came then out of his door to make it and the gutter clean, but Elias de Hubberthorp supposing him to be one that belonged to the Southern party, gave him a cut on the head with his Sword, which being deep to the brain he died soon after. There were several that had that night received wounds, but darkness coming on they were forced to part.¹

Horton was not a personal rival ambushing Hubberthorp for some disagreement in scholarly debate, in competition for fellowship or university position, or in romance for the hand of some local girl. This act of violence was, instead, a misguided if still targeted attack by a member of one nation, a northerner, against a southerner. The small but volatile organizations of students called “nations” were frequently at the center of conflict in the medieval universities.

Whether in England or on the continent the ruling powers viewed the universities as intellectual bodies that spoke to the sophistication and unity of their respective realms. It is no wonder that the King of England himself repeatedly moved to settle matters of conflict among the nations when they escalated at the kingdom’s two primary *studia*, Oxford and Cambridge. Indeed England’s nations were different from those at the universities at Bologna and Paris in that they had only two bodies, northern

¹ Anthony á Wood, *The history and Antiquities of the University of Oxford in Two Books, now first published in English from the original manuscript in the Bodleian Library by John Gutch* (Oxford: John Gutch, 1792-96), 1:401.

students (*borealis*) and southern students (*australes*). The phenomenon of the English North-South divide finds its greatest expression, and its bloodiest repercussions, in the narrow confines of Oxford and Cambridge. The colleges, halls, and streets of these university spaces, consequently, come to resemble contestable borderlands within which conflict proliferated. Thus, in his *Reeve's Tale*, when Chaucer tells us that the Cambridge students John and Aleyn are from “fer in the north” (I.4015), he not only invokes the national conflict of the North-South divide and the anxieties that stem from an encounter with the northern other, but also the highly contained yet extremely volatile conflict of the divide within the English university. Just as the lurking North complicated Englishness for historians of the early Middle Ages, the tension between “scholars segregated by “race” or “nation” in the medieval English universities put in jeopardy what was an emerging political unity, an English nation, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Nation and Violence in the Medieval Universities

From its origins in Bologna the medieval university endured numerous disputes over nation. Nations as distinct university entities appear in the very early thirteenth century at Bologna as subdivisions of colleges within the university formed among the non-Bolognese law students. The designation of “nation” itself possibly referred to the

Roman term “nacion,” a synonym for “foreigner.”² At Bologna, “nation” referred to a student’s place of birth and, later, to his native tongue.³ The mindset of the university nations, which aimed to sustain a body of common interests and kinship, derived in part from the guild system of medieval towns and cities. The varied and small organizations of the university nations periodically came together in two larger bodies: the *universitas ultramontanorum*, which consisted of students from outside of Italy; and the *universitas citramontanorum*, which consisted of students from Italy and its surrounding islands.⁴ According to Pearl Kibre, fourteen nations existed in 1265 at the ultramontane university at Bologna: the French, Spanish, Provencal, English, Picard, Burgundian, Poitevin, Tourainian, Norman, Catalanian, Hungarian, Polish, German, and Gascon. The cisalpine university consisted of three large nations: the Lombard, Tuscan and

² Pearl Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1948), 1. In the Middle Ages, “nacion” was used interchangeably with “gens” and often referred to one’s family.

³ Ibid., 4-5. The definition of one’s nation by his common tongue occurs specifically in 1497 when statutes of the German nation at Bologna define those of its body as scholars who share the German language as their native tongue. Although during the Middle Ages, a student’s principle place of residence rarely superseded his place of birth, by the early sixteenth century at the University of Padua, it had become the common determinant of one’s nation.

⁴ Ibid., 5. For an explanation of the genesis of these two bodies, see Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, vol. 1, 3 vols. ed. F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 154-57.

Roman. Eventually every non-Bolognese student who entered the university took membership in one of these nations.⁵

At Paris, students and masters of common regions congregated together in university houses, but sometime in the early or mid-twelfth century these bodies became corporate entities with seals, treasuries, oaths of membership, and direct and indirect influence on university governance.⁶ The assembled nations at Paris comprised one of the four faculties of arts in the *universitas* (the guild of masters), the others being theology, law, and medicine.⁷ The faculty of nations divided into four main bodies of association. The French nation comprised of scholars from Paris, southern France, Italy, Greece, and the East. The Norman nation consisted of students from the regions of Rouen and Brittany. The Picard nation consisted of students from the low-countries and from northern France. Finally, the English nation was made up of students from the Britain, Holland, Flanders, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. The four nations included students, teaching masters, and regents. In contrast to the nations at Bologna, which had uneven representation in matters of university governance, each nation at Paris was represented equally in university assemblies. This, however, may

⁵ Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities*, 9-11. If a student's nation was not specifically represented in the composition of nations at the university, he would go to the nation whose region was closest to his own.

⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

⁷ Students beneath the masters (regent masters in art) could not vote or take part in faculty deliberations, nor those of the nations. As Kibre explains, "Their only relationship to the nation or the university was through their own masters." Ibid., 15.

have been at the expense of any coherence of ethnic and regional groupings within the four nations. The composition of the Paris nations appears less derived from the strict geographies of its members' origins rather than by what Kibre describes as "convenient, administrative grouping," but this does not detract from students' rampant adherence to their designated nation nor to the violence that stemmed from this peculiar form of "nationalism."

In the case of Bologna, and perhaps of Paris later, these communities mime the larger university's desire for autonomy amidst the communal authority of the city itself. As Kibre notes, students desired these unions of nation for "mutual protection and collective security against local authorities," but the universities as a whole aimed to protect their broader interests from these same authorities by governing themselves.⁸ At the University of Bologna local Bolognese students could not be part of any organization of nation because university officials felt that these students' citizenship in the city and their consequent subjection to the laws of the commune compromised the university's ability to govern them not only in their studies, but their general conduct. Indeed, the first professors at Bologna were excluded as well because they were made up almost entirely of Bolognese residents. Students, then, had to choose their officers from the student body.⁹ Other medieval universities, including the English universities at Oxford and Cambridge, sought similar independence from local secular authority.

⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁹ Rashdall, *Universities* vol. 1, 158-59.

This collective desire for legal autonomy from civic rule may have enhanced the internal tensions among the nations at these *studia*. And if these students first formed tight-knit communities to defend their colleagues-in-nation against secular authorities, these intentions are quickly redirected to the defense of one another against the other nations within their universities.

In his *Historia Occidentalis*, the thirteenth-century chronicler Jacques de Vitry complains of the Paris students, “They wrangled and disputed not merely about the various sects or about some discussions; but the differences between the countries also caused dissensions, hatreds and virulent animosities among them and they impudently uttered all kinds of affronts and insults against one another.”¹⁰ He continues:

They affirmed that the English were drunkards and had tails; the sons of France proud, effeminate and carefully adorned like women. They said that the Germans were furious and obscene at their feasts; the Normans, vain and boastful; the Poitevins, traitors and always adventurers. The Burgundians they considered vulgar and stupid. The Bretons were reputed to be fickle and changeable, and were often reproached for the death of Arthur. The Lombards were called avaricious, vicious and cowardly; the Romans, seditious, turbulent and slanderous; the Sicilians,

¹⁰ Jacobus de Vitriaco, *Historia occidentalis*, Bk. 2, Ch. 7, in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history* (Philadelphia, PA: published for the Dept. of History of the University of Pennsylvania by the University of Pennsylvania Press, 1897-1907) 2:3, 19-20.

tyrannical and cruel; the inhabitants of Brabant, men of blood,
incendiaries, brigands and ravishers; the Flemish, fickle, prodigal,
gluttonous, yielding as butter, and slothful. After such insults from words
they often came to blows.¹¹

Jacques' complaints, though they are rife with regional and national stereotypes (the Bretons' Arthuriana, the Sicilians' cruelty, the French's effeminate demeanor), illustrate a less than diffident body of clerks at Paris. These scholars, in fact, seem to partake of a number of pastimes that are violent (ravishment), slothful (obscenity and gluttony), and even bestial (the English have tails!). A short poem found in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. F. FR. 837, *Le Chastement Des Clercs: A Dit*, further criticizes these clerks, whose internal dissensions and violence against one another within the university now threaten the very institution itself. The clerks are blinded with pride, seeking clashes and even killing their fellow students [Quant l'une nascions muet pot l'autre tuer" (10)]. The poem plays on a metaphor of the University of Paris as a "fountain of knowledge" ["Qu'il sordoit a Paris de toz sens la fontaine" (14)], a designation that the University actively promoted in the thirteenth century.¹² Given the poem's criticism of scholarly in-fighting—to a bloody degree—Daron Burrows argues that the poem's allusions to this "fountain" satirize the University's assumed glory. The

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Daron Burrows, "*Le Chastement des clers: A Dit* concerning the Nations of the University of Paris, Edited from Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. F. FR. 837," *Medium Ævum* 69 (2000): 211-226.

poem claims that the devil himself has replaced this fountain with one of anguish [“... mais, quar deable l’amaïne / Fontaine de dolor” (15-16)]. The fountain now flows into the four nations, infecting the population with murderous intent [“De la fontaine est droiz qu’encore vous dions / Ses ruissiaus espandi en iiij. nacions / plus gleteus xiiij. tans qu’escume de lyons / Quant il est enragiez n’es pas droiz qu’en rions” (21-24)]. F. M. Powicke notes that the University of Paris was “intensely self-conscious and self-important,” but he goes on to explain that this arrogance “had been fostered by flattery and protection and was kept lively by constant disputes over the judicial immunities of the Parisian scholars.”¹³ Like the universities themselves, these students were nearly immune from civic law, and their misdeeds often went unpunished. No doubt, then, that the violence between the nations at Paris, as well as Bologna, Oxford, and Cambridge—institutions that sought similar independence—elicited mockery from civic officials. If these universities reveled in their elitist autonomy, then it was certainly humorous to men of law and governance beyond these institutions’ walls that they could not contain the brutality of their students among themselves. When that violence spread beyond the university, however, they became not simply a joke but a menace.

Quite often, hostilities among the nations at Bologna and Paris arose over disagreements concerning the position of rector at the university. At Paris, this powerful scholar, chosen in rotation from among the nations, singularly headed them collectively.

¹³ F. M. Powicke, “Some Problems in the History of the Medieval University,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 4th Series*, 17 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1934), 4-5.

In other instances confrontations among the nations revolved around questions of borders or the drawing of national lines—in other words, over whether nations could claim certain masters and students from particular places. At Paris, for example, in 1266 a scholar named Jean de Ulliaco, resident of a Picard territory, desired to incept into the French nation. The Picard nation, of which he had been a part, refused to give him up. The ensuing conflict between the French and the Picards resulted in Jean's own kidnapping. The dispute, further, led to the French nation's brief resignation from the university faculties, and the matter was only later settled through the papal legate Simon de Brie. The loyalties generated by this nationalism—loyalty to the corporate nation rather than the university as a whole—often devolved into deadly confrontation. Such an incident occurred in either 1278 or 1281, when a dispute between the English and Picard nations at Paris resulted in several deaths and substantial property damage to the Picard houses of the university. Several members of the Picard nation subsequently fled from Paris with fear for their lives.¹⁴

What seems to antagonize the situation between nations is the very fact that these early medieval universities desired autonomy as places of learning, free from the influence of city or territorial laws. This independence enhanced positions of power within the universities. In these unaffiliated spaces power was at play for any number of candidates in elections for positions such as those of rector or proctor. Infusing a population of young men into such an environment wherein their criminal activities

¹⁴ Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities*, 21.

often went unchecked and where they were arrayed into distinct corporate groups based on their own regional heritage merely begged for such eruptions of violence. If these scholars had chosen any other form of community than nation—as other faculty at Paris exhibited, coming together under common degrees (medicine or law, for instance)—perhaps we would not witness the fighting testified to within any number of universities’ rolls. Even if these institutions had allowed such groupings of scholars and, themselves, been answerable to a local legate, such conflicts may not have arisen so substantially. But the universities’ freedom from secular rule augmented positions of power within its governing bodies and, consequently, the place and influence of nation on this system. The universities became contestable spaces prone to clashes of violence. The story certainly holds at Oxford and Cambridge.

Australes Et Boreales

In the medieval English universities, the nations were not tied directly to university infrastructure and politics. If at Bologna the nations controlled academic policy, at Oxford and Cambridge they had no intended affect on the governance of university life. In other words, as Kibre clarifies, “They never appear to have had any importance in academic matters.”¹⁵ But A. B. Emden is quick to point out a statutory requirement “very probably deriving from the original institution of the office that one of the two Proctors of the University should be a Northerner (Borealis) and the other a Southerner

¹⁵ Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities*, 163.

(Australis).”¹⁶ While agreeing with Kibre that the nations were not intended to play a role in university affairs, Emden explains, “In this way the nascent University, while setting its face against the existence of organized ‘nations’ in its midst, made allowance for the strong regional antipathies which so frequently and so dangerously disturbed its peace.”¹⁷ Despite the intentions of the founders of the various halls and colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, as well as the efforts of university administrators over the course of the Middle Ages, the nations had a profound impact on university life and the reputation of the universities broadly in the kingdom until the early sixteenth century.

Evidence suggests that Oxford attempted to produce in the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries a form of the four nations similar to those at Paris. Documents concerning a dispute between townsmen and the university scholars in 1228 allude to four masters who headed the groups of students, and historians have taken this number, given its closeness to the nations at Paris, as an indication of similar groupings at Oxford.¹⁸ But England’s universities did not draw students from such a large geographic area as did Bologna and Paris, and it seems that any notion of a Paris-like structure was quickly abandoned for two distinct nations, northern and southern, the

¹⁶ A. B. Emden, “Northerners and Southerners in the Organization of the University to 1509,” in *Oxford Studies Presented to Daniel Cullus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press for the Oxford Historical Society, 1964), 1. See also *Statuta Antiqua Universitatis Oxoniensis*, ed. Strickland Gibson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), lxxiv.

¹⁷ Emden, “Northerners and Southerners,” 1.

¹⁸ Rashdall, *Universities* vol. 3, 56.

former, which typically included Scotsmen and the latter, which typically though not always included the Welsh and Irish.¹⁹ Historians of the University of Oxford once believed that the recognized geographic border between the North and South—by which it classified its northern and southern students—was the River Trent,²⁰ which flows up from Staffordshire beneath Nottingham and finally into the Humber. More recently, however, scholars have come to believe that the River Nene, much further south and running through Northampton and Peterborough before heading North to the Wash, was the borderline.²¹ Cambridge clearly had organizations of nation as well,

¹⁹ See Allan Cobban, *The Medieval English Universities: Oxford and Cambridge to c.1500* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1988), 103-4; see also Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities*, 160-166.

²⁰ Rashdall, notably, makes this claim. See *Universities* 3, 57.

²¹ See Emden, "Northerners and Southerners," 4-7. Emden makes this argument based on his study of the provenance of northern proctors from the mid-fourteenth century to the early sixteenth. Most of these officials can be traced to "Lincoln diocese, the country of Lincoln, or, in three cases, more precisely, to Bottesford, Leicestershire, to Northampton and to Collyweston, Northamptonshire, all in Lincoln diocese," which is "not compatible with the acceptance of the Trent as the boundary" (4-5) because the diocese itself fell completely below the River Trent, which actually marked the diocese's northwest border. Emden further argues that "the line of the Nene was related far more nearly to the regional and linguistic diversities that promoted this fierce sense of locality among the young men who resorted to the schools of Oxford in the thirteenth century" (7).

though, as Allan Cobban points out, very little testimony appears as to the sanctioning and practice of nation there.²²

Most of the colleges and halls at Oxford demonstrated a reasonably strict adherence to regional preference (whether they preferred northern or southern students). This was determined in most cases by the regional ties of these colleges' and halls' respective founders, who often had specific desires regarding the places from which their *studia* drew its students. As Emden points out, upon founding Exeter College in 1314, Bishop of Exeter Walter Stapeldon required eight of twelve foundation fellowships be distributed to men of Devon and Cornwall.²³ Exeter College, thus, remained a largely southern-oriented college in the Middle Ages. Merton College (f. 1264) was also largely comprised of southern scholars. Though rumor had it that Walter de Merton intended some admissions to be directed at students from Durham—and the prior of Durham wrote letters urging the college to uphold this intention in the early fourteenth century—the fellows of the college seem to have ignored this request. New College, founded by William of Wykeham around 1379, garnered most of its students from Winchester because the college held property there. All Soul's (f. 1437) and

²² Cobban, *The Medieval English Universities*, 103-4; see also Hackett, *The Original Statutes of Cambridge University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 154. As I will discuss later, much of Cambridge's documents from the thirteenth century were lost in a fire that resulted, fittingly, from a large battle between northern and southern scholars there in 1261.

²³ Emden, "Northerners and Southerners," 10-11.

Magdalen (f. 1458) were both predominantly southern colleges as well.²⁴ University College (f. 1249) and Balliol College (f. 1263), founded by John Balliol and his wife the Lady Dervoguilla,²⁵ were made up predominantly of northern scholars, as were Queen's College (f. 1341) and Lincoln College (f. 1427). Oriel College (f. 1326) had a mix of students. Though northerners appear to have been more prominent, fellowships reserved for students from Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire, and Devon assured a southern presence.²⁶

Boys as young as twelve or thirteen entered these colleges and halls as first-year students, a far cry from the minimum age of twenty at the University of Paris.²⁷ They moved between the city streets and the various buildings that comprised the colleges, halls, and other residences that ranged throughout the city and beyond. Charles Mallet paints a vivid picture of the crowded scene:

²⁴ Ibid., 12. Like Wykham, Magdalen's founder, the Bishop of Waynflete, required the college to admit students from counties wherein the college held property, and so the college had a typical ratio of three-fifths southern students and two-fifths northern students.

²⁵ John Balliol and Lady Dervoguilla were the parents of King John I of Scotland (r.1292-1296).

²⁶ Emden, "Northerners and Southerners," 10-12.

²⁷ Charles Edward Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 1, *The Mediaeval University and the Colleges Founded in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1924), 28n-29n.

Hundreds of students thronged the narrow lanes—little fellows still learning Latin in the grammar schools, older boys of fifteen and sixteen already started on their University careers, youths in the first flush of manhood, eager for mysteries to solve, for worlds to conquer, and ripe for any mischief that hot blood could suggest.²⁸

Though these scholars were poised to learn theology and law among other pursuits, they seemed often to pursue with equal vigor the distractions and temptations of youth and of the town itself. Mallet further illustrates the life of an Oxford student outside of the classroom:

Sport was certainly not unknown. Hawking and cock-fighting were common enough ... Poaching in the woods and streams round Oxford was perhaps more popular still. The roads near the University were sometimes infested by outcast scholars on the look-out for prey, who added the joys of the highwayman to the delights of sport ... The chief amusement of the age was fighting ... Gambling may have needed sharp discouragement. Rowdyism and practical joking required it even more.²⁹

“Hot-blooded” youths and scholars-turned-outlaws doubtless contributed to quarrels at Oxford. So-called “town and gown” arguments arose frequently between local citizens and clerks. This common discord lies at the heart of John the carpenter’s derogatory

²⁸ Ibid., 28-29.

²⁹ Ibid., 148.

remark towards Nicholas in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*—"As ferde another clerke with astromye" (1.3457)—and Symkyn's pleasure at stealing from the university in the *Reeve's Tale*—"He craketh boost and swore it was nat so" (1.4001). But just as conflicts between townspeople and clerks were common, symptomatic of the university's own defiant autonomy, so too were clashes among the scholars themselves.

Besides normal hostilities that arose naturally among young men and boys beyond their parents and guardians, numerous disturbances great and small abounded between the bodies of northern and southern scholars at Oxford in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As at the continental universities, reasons for conflict between the nations at Oxford revolved frequently around the election of officials, particularly the office of proctor. Oxford had two proctors, and their duties were numerous. Proctors were, in a sense, the chief internal lawmen of the university, noting crimes committed by students, collecting fines, doling out punishments, and enforcing statutes and other disciplinary decisions of the university and its head, the chancellor. Proctors, further, supervised elections, administered oaths, and managed the university's finances. The university's regulation that the two proctorships should be divided among northern and southern candidates implies that even though Oxford did not incorporate the nations into its system of operations, as at Paris, it could not ignore them. Oxford, further, regulated the election of many other offices, so that at any point wherein two offices of equal stature were open for election, those elected comprised of one northerner and one southerner. This was the case for collators of university sermons (1 northern, 1

southern), for determiners for undergraduate admission (2 northern, 2 southern), for the keepers of the university's various administrative and loan chests (1 northern, 1 southern for each chest), and even for the scrutators (officials) of the elections for grammar masters (1 northern, 1 southern). As many as thirty-four offices were subject to these regulations, excepting only the offices of chancellor, chaplain, beadle, and registrar.³⁰ Despite these determined lengths towards equality among the nations, animosity still arose, whether it concerned the election of proctors or whether it stemmed from a broader sense of regional loyalties.

The history of the university at Oxford teems with bloody conflict between the two nations. A coroner's inquest of David de Kirkby, for May 4, 1314, describes an altercation between several northern and southern students both armed with "bows, arrows, swords, and bucklers, and other diverse arms."³¹ Apparently, following their defeat, five northerners fled to their hall, which overlooked the battlefield. Seeing the unfortunate southerner Kirkby standing nearby, one northern offender shot and killed him with an arrow. Wood describes the most remarkable example of conflict in the history of the Oxford nations, occurring about 1258, when northern students allied with the Welsh (who were more typically grouped with the southern nation) and flying their own division flags engaged in a pitched battle near town with their southern

³⁰ Emden, "Northerners and Southerners," 2-4.

³¹ "... cum arcabus, sagittis, gladiis, bokelariis et aliis armis diversis ..." J. E. Thorold Rogers, ed., *Oxford City Documents: Financial and Judicial 1268-1665*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 169.

counterparts. Wood intimates this engagement's connection with, perhaps its instigation by, the Baron's Wars ongoing between the nobles of Simon de Montfort's resistance and King Henry III and his son, the future Edward I. As Wood alludes, the northern students and the Welsh coincided with de Montfort's nobles, who included "Leoline, Prince of Wales," while the southerners coincided with the King and included among their number several Frenchmen and other Europeans—in Woods' words, "Strangers and Aliens that were in England"—who were at the university at the King's behest.³² The engagement resulted in multiple deaths on both sides and drew the ire of King Henry, who refused the victors' (the northerners' and the Welsh's) offer of financial compensation. They were saved only by the King's own distractions with the Baron's Wars themselves.³³ We should not be surprised, given the nature of hostilities at the universities, when Chaucer veers from analogues of the *Reeve's Tale*, arming his students with "sword and bokeler" (1.4019). After many years of violence, a 1274 agreement briefly united the nations at Oxford into a single body sworn to support the chancellor in putting down any further disturbances that should arise and, interestingly,

³² Wood, *The history and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, 258-59. See also Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities*, 164.

³³ Wood, *The history and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, 257-58; see also Jan Morris, ed., *The Oxford Book of Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 11-12.

sworn to cease the use of the term “nation” itself.³⁴ Rashdall conflates the unification of Oxford nations with the emergent English nation-state when he claims of the 1274 statute, “The early extinction of nations in the English universities is a symbol of that complete national unity which England was the first of European kingdoms to retain.”³⁵ But this accord at Oxford lasted only a brief period before similar and escalated confrontations proliferated again in the early fourteenth century, once more imperiling state nationalism.

Fleeing the *Studia*

If the violence in the universities frustrated everyone from administrators to the King himself, a greater threat to the universities, and consequently to their signifying power within their respective realms, was student migration. As a result of chronic struggles with the towns or with their fellow scholars, Oxford and Cambridge students, like their counterparts on the continent, occasionally fled these universities for other *studia*. Cambridge itself began in 1206 as an alternative university following several scholars’ migration from Oxford, but England did not desire so significant a rift to occur again. Over the long history of the medieval European universities, the threat of student migration or secession caused anxiety for officials of all ranks— from local magistrates to the King himself.

³⁴ Rashdall, *Universities* 3, 58. See also Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford*, 41.

³⁵ Rashdall, *Universities* 3, 58.

Students might flee from civic oppression as well as from internal strife, and they might take a learned body of masters and fellows of the university with them, a dire situation not merely for the university but for the cities and towns as well. An early example occurs at Bologna in the late twelfth century. Fearing what they viewed as corporate consolidation of power at the universities into the hands of one person, the leaders of the Bolognese commune opposed the students' right to elect their own rector. But they furthered this opposition with statutes aimed to prevent student secession. These statutes conveyed banishment on any student conspiring to or encouraging migration of the university from Bologna. Demonstrating the commune's frustration with scholarly in-fighting, these harsh laws also intimate its fear of losing the university altogether because of the lucrative economic benefits and because of the esteem the institution endowed on the city. Pope Honorius III, who had previously recognized the students' rights to elect their own rector, nevertheless encouraged the students to leave Bologna, which they did between 1217 and 1220.³⁶ After reconciliation, further civic impositions on the office of rector (that this official swear an oath never to remove students from Bologna) and the doctors (that they swear never to teach anywhere else) provoked further migrations in 1222. Only afterwards did the civic authorities of Bologna concede students' rights to elect and swear an oath to their rector. Going further to maintain good relations with students, the commune exempted them from

³⁶ Rashdall, *Universities* vol. 1, 169-71. See also the discussion in Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities*, 6-7.

military service, from communal taxes, and from customs on their books; in addition, students were allowed to buy their own grain.³⁷ As this reconciliation and consolatory action suggests, the importance of the university not merely as a “fountain” of knowledge but as the embodiment of national intellectual power was too precious to chance.

We find several instances of fleeing scholars within the history of the medieval English universities. At Cambridge in 1261, a “sanguinary and brutal” struggle erupted between the northern and southern scholars, this time joined by townspeople on both sides. In the melee, several properties sustained damage; most notably, the records of the university were consumed in a fire.³⁸ Several scholars fled the turmoil to Northampton, where they were followed by many of their Oxford counterparts a short time later.³⁹ Henry III even acknowledged the settlement of the Northampton university

³⁷ Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities*, 8.

³⁸ As Kibre points out, “It is this destruction of university archives together with similar acts of violence in 1322 and 1381, that probably explains in large part the obscurity surrounding the development of the Cambridge *studium generale* during the thirteenth and even fourteenth centuries” (Ibid., 167).

³⁹ See Cobban, *The Medieval English Universities*, 29-30. Northampton had been the site of a *studium generale* late in the reign of Henry II and into the reign of Richard I. Northampton might rival Oxford attraction of students from the West of England if only for its location, while it was less of a threat to Cambridge’s recruiting grounds. Cobban claims that although Northampton had granted Oxford primacy by the end of the twelfth century, a college of some sort remained there. In addition to the 1260 migrations, Oxford scholars are said to have moved there, as well, in 1238.

that year, though it was short-lived. Eighteenth-century antiquarian Francis Peck tells of the Oxford group's migration to Northampton in 1264 after several disputes with local townsmen. These Oxford men, by chance or poor luck, resided in Northampton during the Baron's Wars, and they, in fact, aided a futile defense of the town against King Henry's men. Although the King pardoned them, later—it is thought only to appease any youth who might identify with the young scholars—he dissolved the university at Northampton and forced these students to return to Oxford. Though the loss of records prevents us from knowing the whole story at Cambridge for several decades following the 1261 migration, Oxford continued to witness numerous conflicts between its nations. None, however, was more dramatic than the Stamford Schism of the 1330s.

Causes of the Stamford Schism range from internal discord surrounding allegations of discrimination made by northern scholars regarding admission practices and the distribution of scholarships to the belief that both the town and the university had grown physically threatening to northerners residing therein.⁴⁰ Brasenose College historian Falconer Madan points out that there seems to be no evidence for quarrel with townsmen, but rather that the “stress of internal faction” led to the removal of the

⁴⁰ See Katherine Walsh, *A Fourteenth-Century Scholar and Primate. Richard Fitzralph in Oxford, Avignon and Armagh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 71-84. Walsh summarizes the various alleged reasons for the Schism; Wood, *The history and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, 426, suggests that Merton College refused admission of several northern scholars.

scholars to Stamford.⁴¹ Francis Peck, in his *Annals of Stamford*, reprints a 1334 petition to the King allegedly from the migrant scholars.⁴² In it they claim that their move to Stamford stemmed from “many debates, counsels, & differences which long time have been, & still are in the university of Oxenforde, whereby great damages, perils, deaths, murders, maims, & robberies oftentimes have happened.”⁴³ There appear to have been thirty-six scholars in all who fled to Stamford. Emden claims that the leader was the Master (magistri) William de Barneby, a Yorkshireman.⁴⁴ With Barneby were fifteen other masters, the majority of whom came from Yorkshire as well.⁴⁵

One must ask why these scholars went to Stamford. Certainly, their destination was influenced by the monks at Durham, who offered their Stamford property, St. Leonard’s Priory, as a building for the exiled scholars to house their studies. But Stamford had been a successful university town in its own right for many years prior to

⁴¹ Falconer Madan, “Brasenose College,” *The Colleges of Oxford: Their Histories and Traditions*, ed. Andrew Clark (London: Methuen and Co., 1891), 253.

⁴² The petition can be found in Cotton MS Vesp. E. xxi, fo. 62

⁴³ Francis Peck, *Academia Tertia Anglicana, or the Antiquarian Annals of Stanford* [sic] *in Lincoln, Rutland, and Northampton Shires in XIV Books* (London: printed for James Bettenham, 1727), 6:16-17.

⁴⁴ Emden, “Northerners and Southerners,” 5.

⁴⁵ George C. Broderick lists both a William de Barnaby and a John de Twislington, who Broderick claims was “among those who lectured at Stamford in 1335.” Broderick, *Memorial of Merton College, with Biographical Notices of the Wardens and Fellows* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 188, 197.

the Schism.⁴⁶ Carmelites settled in the town in the mid-thirteenth century, establishing several schools around which the structure of a formal university gradually gathered over the next several decades, though it was never named or officially recognized. Henry III's dispersal of the Northampton school following the resistances of 1265 further strengthened the Stamford *studium*. According to Wood, in 1291 Robert Lutterel conferred to the Gilbertine convent of Sempingham a manor in Stamford for the sustainment of students studying there.⁴⁷ Afterwards, the town's university community witnessed a significant outgrowth of colleges, halls, inns, and monastic schools.⁴⁸ So, the Oxford scholars immersed in the Stamford Schism were not fleeing to the wiles of Lincolnshire; rather they moved to a thriving university community that, at the time, may have been asserting itself against the two established universities of Oxford and Cambridge.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ancient tradition held that the Bretonic King Bladud (c. 863 BC), mentioned in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, perhaps the father of Lear, and famously the creator of the hot springs at Bath, is said to have created a university at Stamford that flourished until the coming of Augustine, after which it was dispersed for its heretical practices. *Collectanea*, vol. 1, ed. C. R. L. Fletcher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 2.

⁴⁷ Wood, *The history and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, 432.

⁴⁸ *Collectanea* vol. 1, 4.

⁴⁹ See Emden, "Northerners and Southerners," 7. Emden adds a further note to their Stamford migration, that the town itself lay just a short distance above the River Nene, the dividing line in the university's eyes between the North and South

What the Schism becomes is another drama, albeit a unique one, in the long history of North-South relations. As we witnessed in chapter one of this study, the North as a region was subject to both physical and ideological attacks by those from elsewhere in England. Some of these assaults were justified, while others resembled the disparaging rhetoric that is so often directed towards the cultural other. Over the longue durée of the Middle Ages, the North's history of rebellion and its defiant autonomy consistently threaten the broader communitarian desires of the ruling powers of England, desires that we may define, again, as early English nationalism. And this threat might be seen in the case of the universities as well. As the northern scholars retreat from Oxford in the face of alleged oppression and open threats, their own defiance endangers the cohesiveness of England as signified in its two great "fountains of knowledge": Oxford and Cambridge. If the conflict of nations in the university were so often contained within the small confines of the colleges, halls, and towns of these two cities, then the Stamford Schism illustrates just how the North-South divide inevitably works its way out of and beyond the local to once again jeopardize national interests.

The emotional pitch of the Schism is best exemplified by two obscure poems, authored, it would seem, by northerners who participated in or had some interest in the events of the Stamford migration. They occur in British Library Royal MS. 12. D. xi, described by H.E. Salter as a formulary written at Oxford, which contains letters to and

from the university from 1330-1339.⁵⁰ Salter describes one of these poems as a “paean by the northern party over the death of a southern champion named Fulk.”⁵¹ Though the poem does not itself offer any explicit commentary on the situation of the Schism, it can be linked to the events surrounding the migration through the name of its antagonist, Fulk. Emden claims that in the worse-than-usual violence between northerners and southerners that preceded the Schism, one southern master, Fulk de Lacy, died of wounds received in the fighting.⁵² Though we do not know whether or not this Fulk’s death inspired the poem, its occurrence in the manuscript with another more distinct Stamford poem, discussed below, suggests that its relation is certainly a possibility.

The poem reads:

Fulk, hero of the southerners, whose nation fostered brotherhood,
O, has the northern dog not bitten you Fulk?
O Fulk, Fulk, Jesus did not exist to you;
You lie in a foul ditch, eaten by worms.
Perhaps you learned what bears on the exaltation of the mind
In Christ’s service you sowed rage,
since you were an effuser of blood, a mutilator,
An avenger and mocker. Master, why were you not afraid?
You beget crimes when you could,

⁵⁰ H. E. Salter, “The Stamford Schism,” *English Historical Review* 37 (1922): 249.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁵² Emden, “Northerners and Southerners,” 5.

Warlike fool, but you struck with arrogance.
 Now having deserved death—your corpse lies unburied.
 In you are they signified. Worthy God gives all things according to their
 desert.
 O ashes of your demise, which are to you the body of honor,
 You rashly conducted so many devastating and bloody campaigns.
 Tell us where is Roger now, where is Satan you accomplice,
 in savage murder; he willed what you willed.
 Hereford the flag bearer, leader of that sinister band,
 And Sporman, leader of the campaign and an agent of death.
 Speak of the true conflict, which was always hidden;
 They fled from truthful speech, they ascribed the reverse.
 Wyk, say where you are, or say where is Wymbury;
 When death appeared, neither's sword was discerned.
 Vengeance of the divine over time is efficient;
 Finally, the fault of the worthless culprit buries your corpse.
 Whether you are southern or northern
 Such is fitting punishment for evil-doers.⁵³

⁵³ My translation. "Fulco vir australis, quem gens laicana colebat, / O non mordebat te, Fulco, canis borealis? / O Fulco, Fulco, spes non fuerat tibi Iesus; / In tetro sulco latitas, quia vermibus esus. / Forsan novisti quid fert elatio mentis; / In famulos Christi sevisti more furentis. / Sanguinis effusor, mutulator quando fuisti, / Ultor et illusor. Dominum

The poet's emotions are evident. Driven to animal rage—signified by the metaphoric northern canine ("*canis borealis*")—northerners strike at this southern champion, Fulk, with deadly results. The northern protagonists, however, are not aggressors actively seeking a fight or declaring war on their southern counterpart. Instead, they are victims of attack who defend themselves aptly. This Fulk "sows rage" with bloody contempt, striking "arrogantly" against northerners and backed by a demon band of men, including Hereford, Wyk, Wymbury, and Satan himself abetting murder.⁵⁴ Despite the apparent regionalist stakes involved, the poet intimates that the issue is one of morality rather than nation. Acknowledging the heart of the matter, the poet posits, "Whether you are northern or southern, Fulk's death is fitting for such an evil doer." This final

cur non metuisti? / Criminis ortator fueras quando potuisti, / Stultus bellator, set cum fastu cecidisti. / Mortis condigna—funus pro funere restat— / In te sunt signa; digno deus omnia prestat. / O cinis ex cinere, quo sint tibi carnis honores, / Egisti temere tot devastando cruores. / Dic ubi Rogerus, Sathane tuus ille satelles, / In feriendo ferus; vellet quod dicere velles. / Herford vexilli lator, dux ille sinister, / Et Sporman belli ductor mortisque minister. / Dic in conflictu finali, quo latuerunt; / Veraci dictu fugerunt, terga dederunt. / Wyk dic quo fuerat, vel dic ubi Wymbyriensis; / Cum mors affuerat, nuetrius cernitur ensis. / Ulcio digna dei per tempora longa pepercit; / Demum culpa rei vili te funere mersit. / Seu sis australis, seu tu sis vir borealis, / Talibus est talis congrua pena malis." Salter, 252-53.

⁵⁴ Salter suggests a date of 1332 or 1333 for the poem. This is based in part on the allusion to Hereford, and Salter offers that this could be Thomas de Hereford, who was an Oxford beadle (part of this office was to police the students against crime and violence). Salter also finds Rogerus le Bedel in 1332, and an Edward de Wyke, elected proctor in 1333, each of whom may be the men referred to in the poem. Ibid., 252.

line, however, does not overwrite the rest of the poem's regionally conscious imagery, particularly the poet's revelry at the rotting body of Fulk, lying in a "foul ditch."

If the "Fulk" poem sounds like an emotional burst by one or more youths following yet another violent and bloody confrontation between northern and southern students, the other poem is more clearly attendant to the Schism itself. Explicitly addressed to Richard Fitzralph, the chancellor of Oxford at the time of the Schism, the poem both derides him for his handling of the Stamford incident and subtly threatens his person as well. Fitzralph, a professor of theology of some notoriety for his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, rose to the chancellorship of Oxford on May 30, 1332, just one year after his inception as doctor of theology.⁵⁵ Given that this poem's content suggests that the parties await a decision from the King, we may tentatively date its composition prior to August 2, 1334, when King Edward called for the dispersal of the Stamford school by the sheriff of Lincoln.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Walsh, *A Fourteenth-Century Scholar*, 71-72. Fitzralph had already walked into an ongoing struggle between the university and the absentee archdeacon of Oxford, Cardinal Gailard Lamotte, who continually sought to extend his authority over the university among other places. The cardinal attempted legislation against the university at Avignon, and during Fitzralph's tenure the university was forced to send a proctor, in this instance Simon Bredon, to the papal curia to stand for the university. This minor crisis would continue some ten years more following Fitzralph's chancellorship.

⁵⁶ Salter, 249.

Fitzralph is believed to have made a brash speech after the initial migration had transpired in which he wagered his head that the episode would be over in six months.⁵⁷

His statement seems to inspire a whole rhetoric of decapitation in the poet:

Fertile Fitzralph, you who live with abundant provisions,
While pouring forth other provisions, let your vows be from somewhere
else.

You appear to spare a capital crime with your promise,
Yet, because your words be of evil cause, you only convict yourself by
swearing.

While your language seem strong toward the so-called guilty who have
Already been seized, as though your oaths were realized in actuality,
It is not necessary to offer your head expressly.

In Stamford, now is a place of study,
One hated by its enemies. According to a certain proctor,
We ought to be suppressed, lest the ship be without oarsmen.

You promised yourself that a head would be cut off within a year.
But what if we persist, and the king and the law willingly allow our
university?

The virtues of peace have been commanded, so our exodus is not a
crime,

⁵⁷ Salter, 250. Salter claims attributes the suggestion to his colleague A. G. Little.

It remains that you suffer what was agreed upon, and you will pay with
your head as the pledge.

Alas the fate of the wretched; then, you will throw back your old words.

It is clear to all; things will come and things will go,

But the severed head will never return.

You prophesied by the stars,

You watched the stars while you sought to cut us off,

You trampled us; only the snare is broken by the foot of he who set it,

You made this multitude of ours, propagated from the cuttings of your
university; your words are from no prophet.

I reject the bloody ford of the horned ox.

I choose, instead, suitable pasture; I welcome this fertile place.

Beneath the shield of Stamford I will live safely,

Where I think it good; thus I exchange oppression for a nobler time.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ My translation. "Fy-Rauf fecunde, qui rebus vivis habunde, / Res alias funde, tua pignora sint aliunde, / Parcere letali prodest pene capitali, / Et, quia causa mali, convinci pignora tali. / Dum rea possesse valeant quasi pignus in esse, / Set caput expresse non est offere necesse. / In Vada Saxosa, que nunc loca sunt studiosa, / Hostibus exosa, profers quedam capitaosa, / Nos debere premi, nisi sint sine remige remi, / Anno sub demi capud hinc spondes tibi demi. / Quid si perstemus, velit et rex lege volente? / Cum non sit facinus, pacis virtute iubente. / Restat pacta pati, capud et pro pignore solves. / Heu miseri fati; tunc dicta priora revolves. / Omnibus est visum; veniet res resque peribit, / Sed capud abcisum per tempora nulla redibit. / Cum divniasti cursus sectando

While the poet and his peers clearly await the King's decision—thus, neutralizing the King himself as any embodiment of centralized authority—they portray Chancellor Fitzralph as an oppressive power striking at their new college and their northern nation. The contested crime, here, is admittedly a capital one [*“capitali”*], the punishment of which is death. The poet's use of “capud” and “caput” (heads) suggests the violent stakes of the poem as a responsive utterance to Fitzralph's own promise of “heads.” It seems that both proverbial and literal “heads” will roll.

The poem employs a disturbing play on headlessness [*“Capud abisiscum”*]. Wryly jabbing at Fitzralph for the chancellor's arrogant profession that the schism would end so quickly, the poet asserts that Fitzralph should not offer his own head through misguided vows of retribution against the Stamford scholars. In other words, Fitzralph condemns himself through his apathetic and, at times, aggressive response to the exiled students' concerns. Continuing the play on headlessness, the poet argues that although Fitzralph wants heads—the symbolic head of the Stamford group, perhaps William Barneby, and the literal heads of all those involved—the chancellor will pay for the scholars' wrongful oppression with his own head in the end. And while we may easily envision this retort to Fitzralph's brash statement and his handling of the schism

planete, / Sidera servasti, dum nos vis iungere mete; / Nos conculcasti; modo frangitur a pede rete; / Plurima plantasti; non sunt tua verba prophete / Cum bove cornuto vada sanguinolenta refuto; / Pascua permuto; loca fertiliora saluto. / Sub saxi scuto magis est michi vivere tuto, / Quo meliora puto; sic tempus nobile muto.” Salter, 251.

as mere vindictive word play, the poet confuses the matter by implying ambiguously that the “severed head will never return.” The image works both for the Oxford head, Fitzralph, whom the poet seems to argue should be removed from his powerful position—and, of course, Fitzralph’s tenure was ending in 1334 in the midst of the Schism—but it also works for the exiled Stamford students as well. The poet endows these scholars, perhaps his colleagues, with a certain ethos that marks them as an essential part of the Oxford corpus, a head that will never return to its abusive body.

Still, this rhetoric of decapitation intimates a national problem. The act of beheading historically has come to signify a ritual of nationhood, a moment of emergent community identity, from the very moment David claimed the head of the Phillistine giant Goliath and Israel was affirmed. Margaret Owens suggests that the display of the head “serves as a striking, unmistakable icon signifying not only the defeat and demise of the victim but, more crucially, the transfer of political power that is often consolidated through this act of violence.”⁵⁹ The fragmentation of the enemy’s body inversely denotes the wholeness of the victor. But, as Owens reminds, representations of decapitation also serve as “symbolic markers of national, ethnic, and religious difference.”⁶⁰ Owens’s equation holds true for the Stamford poet who sees not one head but two in this poem of decapitation. For the Stamford poet the severed head figures as a symbol of the separation and autonomy of the alternative *studia* at Stamford. He

⁵⁹ Margaret Owens, *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late-Medieval and Early Modern Drama* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 145.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

further views Oxford, signified through Fitzralph, as a different body altogether. It is a case of two different heads and two different bodies, Oxford and Stamford, northern and southern. This duality illustrates, then, the inherent antagonism that problematizes North-South relations, not merely in the university but broadly in the realm of England.

The National Problem of the University Nations

Clearly, the Stamford Schism caught the attention of more than just the body of Oxford scholars and their chancellor, who witnessed the break first hand. Not only does King Edward III involve himself significantly in the dispute, but we can also see the people of Stamford and larger Lincolnshire—as well as the Durham monks responsible for St. Leonard’s Priory where the exiled scholars resided—as stakeholders in the ensuing debate of whether to let the Stamford university remain. Indeed, interest stretches across the East and North of England beyond Oxford, making clear the national implications of the conflict. If the Stamford *studia* was already perceived as a threat to Oxford or Cambridge prior to 1334, C. R. L. Fletcher explains that with the Stamford Schism “[t]he danger becomes acute,” and the Schism itself leads ultimately to the abrogation of the university altogether.⁶¹ Fletcher continues:

this was the destruction of Stamford, for the energies of Oxford and Cambridge were called into action, the aid of the royal power was invoked and obtained,

⁶¹ *Collectanea* vol. 1, 4.

and the unequal contest soon ended in the complete triumph of the historic Universities.⁶²

Indeed, the royal power to which Oxford protested in response to the scholars' own petition to King Edward was that of Queen Philippa. In February of 1334, the powers at Oxford appealed to the Queen in their own letter while the King pursued war with Scotland.⁶³ But all that transpired in the months following these petitions were more migrations to Stamford.⁶⁴ On August 2, the King commanded the Sheriff of Lincoln to disperse the alternative university, and a month later he appointed a panel of distinguished Bishops (Durham, Coventry, Lichfield, and Norwich) to hear complaints and settle the matter between the scholars and the University of Oxford. None of this led to cessation of studies at Stamford, however, and Edward again on November 1 ordered the Sheriff to act. Even then, no one left. Several months later, in March 1335, William Trussel, by Edward's command, dispersed some of the students and masters from Stamford, but half of the original thirty-five scholars in question came back and began their studies again. Finally, the King himself confiscated their property and left no doubt about the end of the Stamford school.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ The University's letter, written in French, along with letters to Henry, Bishop of Lincoln, and the King Edward III, both in Latin, are reprinted in *Collectanea* vol. 1, 8-11.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.

The contest of nations in the medieval English universities is remarkable in that it performs in miniature the ideological and psychological antagonisms of the larger medieval North-South divide. Neither ranged across broad geographies (above and below the Humber) nor feuding across historical borders (as William of Malmesbury and Bede), these northern and southern scholars faced off in the tiny confines of their colleges and halls. Despite the intensely local nature of the conflict, the university nations threatened the stability of their institutions, Oxford and Cambridge, which were fast becoming intellectual symbols of the English realm. In their symbolism lies the significance of the Stamford Schism itself, which, more clearly than any other episode between the nations, illustrates the connectivity of the universities to the national fabric of England. The Schism not only threatened to undermine the University of Oxford as England's primary *studia*, it imperiled the university as signifier of England's growing cultural and political strength and its emboldened nationalism on the European stage.

Despite the seeming finality of the Schism, struggles between the nations continue violently well after 1335. Kibre notes that in 1389 another pitched battle took place between the Welsh and southern students against the northern students. The northerners were victorious, and they pressed their victory by sacking the inns of the losers, stealing their goods and driving the Welsh out of town altogether "while shooting arrows at them and subjecting them to gross insults."⁶⁵ John Trevisa, the

⁶⁵ Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities*, 166. See also Wood, *The history and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, 519-21.

translator of Ranulph Higden's popular *Polychronicon*, was expelled himself from Queen's College in 1378 for his part (perhaps as instigator) in a severe quarrel between northern and southern scholars.⁶⁶ It is ironic, then, that Trevisa translates several of William of Malmesbury's anti-northern diatribes in his edition of Higden: "Al þe longage of þe Norþumbres, and specialliche at 3ork, is so scharp, slitting, and frotynge and vnschape, þat we souþerne men may þat longage vneþe vnderstonde."⁶⁷ Trevisa's vernacular chronicle proved popular in the later fourteenth century, and his patron, Sir Thomas Berkeley brought Trevisa's text to London around 1387 for further distribution.⁶⁸ It is perhaps merely coincidental that Geoffrey Chaucer, around that time, penned his *Reeve's Tale* about two scholars from the "solar halle" at Cambridge who speak in a funny northern tooth.

⁶⁶ David C. Fowler, *The Life and Times of John Trevisa, Medieval Scholar* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 28.

⁶⁷ Higden and Trevisa, *Polychronicon*, 162.

⁶⁸ See Ralph Hanna III, "Sir Thomas Berkeley and His Patronage," *Speculum* 64 (1989): 878-916.

Chapter Three

“Chaucer’s Uncanny Regionalism: Rereading the North in the *Reeve’s Tale*”

Considered one of the most striking instances of regionalism in medieval English literature, Chaucer’s use of northern dialect in the *Reeve’s Tale* has monopolized interpretation of the text’s attention to the North of England. The Reeve tells us that his clerks are from “fer in the north” (I.4015), and although he “kan nat telle where” (I.4015), the Reeve aptly mimes a recognizable northern speech. Hoping to stymie Symkyn’s thievery, they long to see “How that the hopur waggis til and fra” (I.4039). Literary historians famously have designated the text’s linguistic northernisms the first use of dialect for comedy in English literature. Among early critics, J. R. R. Tolkien establishes what becomes a frequent refrain, calling the tale’s northern dialect “primarily a linguistic joke” while also claiming it as “dramatic realism” and the product of “philological curiosity.”¹ Critics in his wake have consequently viewed the tale’s dialect as shallow regionalism born of a few instances of the northern long /a/

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, “Chaucer as Philologist: *The Reeve’s Tale*,” *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1934), 2-3. By 1934, Tolkien can already claim that the tale’s northern speech is “so well known that it is taken for granted” (3). A. C. Spearing calls the tale’s dialect a “consistent realism.” Spearing, *The Reeve’s Prologue and Tale, with the Cook’s Prologue and the Fragment of his tale from the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), 3; Derek Pearsall terms the clerks mere “rustic buffoons.” Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 188.

amidst other northernisms that largely serve the tale's literary realism, its inherent comedy, and its context in the quitting game between the Miller and Reeve.

Far from lending itself only to comedy, however, the North maintains a significant and sustained presence within the narrative landscape of the *Canterbury Tales*. Including the Reeve's own story, four of the eight tales set on English soil refer to the North of England at some point in their narrative.² In the *Man of Law's Tale*, Constance finds herself washed ashore "Fer in Northumberlond" (II.508) where her own "Latyn corrupt" (II.519) is hardly understood. The devil-yeoman of the *Friar's Tale*, again, hails from "fer in the north contree" (III.1413), and the Summoner sets his own tale in Yorkshire in "A mersshy countree called Holdernes" (III.1710). *The Canterbury Tales* draws to a close with the Parson's vehement rejection of the northern alliterative verse form: "I am a Southren man; / I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre" (X.42-3). The region's repeated appearance in the *Canterbury Tales* implies that the North has far greater implications for Chaucer than the linguistic humor and realism that has occupied attention for much of the *Reeve's Tale's* critical history.

Only recently have critics begun to move past the philological joke. Notably, Katie Wales offers various historical circumstances that might undergird Chaucer's use

² The three other tales I consider as explicitly taking place in England are those of the Miller, Cook, the Canon's Yeomen and arguably the Wife of Bath (with its Arthurian setting). Although its setting is not specified, we can argue that *the Nun's Priest Tale* take place in England given the reference to the martyred St. Kenelm of Mercia (VII.4301-4302).

of northern dialect, circumstances that she claims are “completely ignored” by linguistic historians: “the Anglo-Scottish wars of the fourteenth century”; the tense political situation in the years surrounding the likely date of composition of the *Canterbury Tales*; “[t]he attention of Richard II ... entirely focused on the wild borderlands as a political arena.”³ Thus, the northern dialect draws on more than a “simple opposition between southern superiority and northern inferiority.”⁴ Literary critics have also largely ignored these circumstances while pursuing new readings of the *Reeve’s Tale*. Combining cultural history and contemporary fourteenth-century politics, Wales suggests that, through the tale’s northern dialect and other allusions, “the mythology of the ‘North-South divide’ is intensified and complicated by new images of the political and ethnic, as the border conflicts and defence of the ‘frontier’ began to heighten the sense of an ‘English’ nation.”⁵ Given the focus of her study, which aims at a diachronic understanding of the social history of northern English to the present day, Wales does not further elaborate on her provocative comments about the *Reeve’s Tale*. But her observations adumbrate the literary effect of a northern consciousness on England’s emerging national literature. Such a comment suggests that we might profitably reexamine the North’s role in the *Reeve’s Tale* as participating in a dialectic of region and nation.

³ Katie Wales, *Northern English: A Cultural and Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*

There is clearly something more to be said about the North in the *Reeve's Tale*. Rather than its linguistic northernisms, however, I propose to analyze the *Reeve's Tale's* conceptual northernness, viewing the northern dialect as a symptom of the tale's complex integration of the English North and the historical phenomenon of the North-South divide. In reading Chaucer's regionalism in the text—both his depiction of northerners and his implied concerns for the Southeast in which he lives—as an attempt to work through anxieties provoked by the North's uncanny presence in England, we discover Chaucer's emergent national consciousness and the ways that regional identity complicate and contest his project.

Far in the North

Even recent regionally-inflected readings of medieval literature have posited the notion of a regionalism that participates in the larger conversation of nation, including those already mentioned in the introduction to the present study. Approaching the regional view from the perspective of national narratives, Thorlac Turville-Petre has suggested that “The integration of divided loyalties is the driving force behind *Havelok*, as it constructs a revised national story in which the Lincolnshire community plays a central part.”⁶ By examining the Lincolnshire from which *Havelok* emerges, then, Turville-Petre analyzes “the ways in which local communities expressed their sense of regional distinctiveness but at the same time demanded to be included in the image the nation

⁶ Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 143.

had constructed of itself.”⁷ Similarly, Kathy Lavezzo points out the “local pride Ranulph Higden evinces” in his *Polychronicon* despite the notorious reputation of Cheshire in the early and mid-fourteenth century.⁸ Higden overwrites England’s internal strife with the insular realm’s own claims of marginality to the rest of the world as evidenced in mappaemundi: “The unrest characterizing Higden’s nation, county, and even abbey remind us how periods of social unrest provoke national texts ... how writers imagine a united and sovereign national culture when that culture is itself divided.”⁹ Like *Havelok* and the *Polychronicon*, the *Canterbury Tales*—emerging amidst the social and political turmoil of the 1380s and early 1390s—demonstrates an assured interest in negotiations of the local and the national with its pilgrims from “every shires ende” (I.15) who are forced to confront internal difference in order to achieve communal salvation at the shrine of Thomas Beckett.

Chaucer’s position in London distinguishes his regionalism from that of the *Havelok* author or Higden. He does not pen his text from the margins of the realm, hoping to overwrite cultural differences in order to infuse his own disparate region into the national imagination; rather, Chaucer writes from what is, in the late fourteenth century, the emerging center of English politics, law, and culture. London’s centrality is not unproblematic. Noting the scant literary production of England’s chief city during the early and mid-fourteenth century, Ralph Hanna finds that “before Chaucer, London

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World*, 75.

⁹ Ibid., 75-76.

may truly have been ‘provincial’, among England’s vernacular literary backwaters, just another locality.”¹⁰ Hanna’s words and the terminus of his study (1380), however, localize Chaucer as a transitional figure, while Chaucer consciously places his own southeastern vernacular literature within a national framework wherein London becomes the focal point. This telescoping is evident in the *Reeve’s Tale*. Moreover, in his sociolinguistic study of the tale’s dialectology, Robert Epstein claims that the northern speech ultimately “serves to demonstrate that only the London dialect is the proper form of artistic expression; all other dialects become variations from the norm.”

¹¹ More than linguistic hierarchies, however, Chaucer’s regionalism in the *Reeve’s Tale* (and over the course of the *Canterbury Tales*) argues that London is the center around which the rest of England turns, whose gravity draws in provincials and foreigners alike.¹² London becomes the icon for a clear English hegemony in the Southeast—comprised of Westminster, London, and Canterbury as seats of law, commerce, and

¹⁰ Ralph Hanna, *London Literature 1300-1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2-3.

¹¹ Robert Epstein, “‘Fer in the North; I kan nat telle where’”: Dialect, Regionalism, and Philologism,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 30 (2008): 106.

¹² See David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 156-81. In Chaucer’s oeuvre London largely constitutes an “absent city,” in Wallace’s words, but this is only in the most literal sense. If London is rarely a setting in Chaucer’s poetry, it nevertheless haunts the works of the poet for whom it is a backdrop in his daily life.

church—by the end of the fourteenth century, a designation cemented by the intense government consolidation in the later fifteenth century.

Chaucer consequently writes from this new center as if to understand better marginal communities—such as the medieval North—whose peoples were by then regularly infiltrating the city. John Bowers has called this communitarian impulse an “‘inside job’ undertaken by members of the ruling elite, Chaucer included, [whose] goal was the extension of a sense of collective belonging from the *polis* to the *patria*, from the face-to-face society of the city to the abstract community of the nation.”¹³ Yet, the tension inhering in this transition from mere province (Hanna’s “literary backwater”) to national center occurs in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, wherein connotations of imperialism disturb the sense of communitarian wholeness. Explicitly, Epstein argues that Chaucer’s role in depicting northern speech in the *Reeve’s Tale* “resembles Said’s description of an Orientalist,” whose representation of the other seems “objective, accurate, for the purpose of ‘useful knowledge’ but the knowledge is useful to groups already in socially superior positions, whose authority is further legitimated by their access to philological knowledge.”¹⁴ In such a way, the *Reeve’s Tale*’s funny northern speech is meant to quell anxieties about a more dangerous northern other, so that

¹³ John M. Bowers, “Chaucer After Smithfield: From Postcolonial Writer to Imperialist Author,” in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen (New York: St. Martins, 2000), 57.

¹⁴ Epstein, “‘Fer in the North,’” 114. Epstein refers to Said’s description of the Orientalist in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 160.

Chaucer's Southeast might feel comfortable about the ill-defined North's assured place within the realm. The North becomes an object of study whose representation in the literature of London and the Southeast bears witness to a presumed inferiority.

Even before the clerks' northern idiom, however, Chaucer can be seen to bring the *patria* into the *polis* through the figure of Oswald the Reeve. Yet his ambivalent persona is far more unsettling than comical. The Reeve's own Norfolk dialect associates him with the great number of East Midlanders who poured into London in the fourteenth century. Thomas Garbáty points to the Reeve's Norfolk speech as something "all Londoners knew," that the Reeve is a "stock figure in London."¹⁵ Derek Pearsall further exclaims of Oswald, "That one of the nastiest people in the *Canterbury Tales* should come from Norfolk seems a gratuitous slur, and one suspects that Chaucer is playing on Londoners' contempt for parvenu immigrants from that area, especially given that they came into London in such numbers."¹⁶ Oswald, then, occupies the uncanny space of a "common" London stranger.¹⁷

¹⁵ Thomas Garbáty, "Satire and Regionalism in *the Reeve's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 8 (1972): 2-3, 6; On the Reeve's Norfolk dialect, see Simon Horobin, "Chaucer's Norfolk Reeve," *Neophilologus* 86 (2002): 609-12; and Richard Beadle, "Prolegomena to a Literary Geography of Later-medieval Norfolk," in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts: Essays Celebrating the Publication of A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, ed. Felicity Riddy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 89-108, especially 93-94.

¹⁶ Derek Pearsall, "Strangers in Late-Fourteenth Century London," in *The Stranger in Medieval Society*, ed. F. R. P. Akehurst and Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden (Minneapolis:

Oswald's East Anglia origins also make him one of what John Trevisa calls the "men of myddel Engeland" who "understondeþ better þe side langages, norþerne and souþerne, þan norþerne and souþerne understondeþ eiþer oþer."¹⁸ It is not surprising, then, that the Reeve can mimic northern dialect in his tale and also speak to southerners such as those on the pilgrimage with him. He is truly a "myddel man." This intertwining of the familiar and the strange in the Reeve's immigrant status and linguistic acumen carries over into his presence in the *Canterbury Tales*. His emergence from the "hyndreste of oure route" (I.622) to the center of the contest in order to quit the Miller, his self-description of his "hoor heed and ... grene tayl" (I.3878) and his "olde lemes" (I.3886) and "coltes tooth" (I.3888), his likeness to the "open-ers" (I.3871) or medlar's fruit that is rotten yet ripe at the same time, all frame the context of an ambiguous North in his tale. The paradox of the Reeve outlines the ensuing contemplation of an uncanny North that subtly underlies his narrative.

Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 51. For a thorough account of immigrant migration to London in the fourteenth century, see Eilert Ekwall, *Studies on the Population of Medieval London* (Stockholm: Lund, 1956).

¹⁷ Pearsall explains three terms often used to refer to non-citizens of London. "Strangers" are those people from other parts of England who immigrated to London. "Aliens" are those people from overseas who came to the city. "Foreigners" are residents of London, but, as with the city's strangers and aliens, they were not freemen or citizens; rather, they were unenfranchised. "Strangers," 48-49. In this essay, I will use these terms as Pearsall defines them here.

¹⁸ Higden and Trevisa, *Polychronicon*, 163.

Chaucer's apparent simple evocation of northernness through dialect in the *Reeve's Tale* means to calm anxieties provoked by the North's equivocal identity. Yet through its dialectology the *Reeve's Tale*, unwittingly or otherwise, imports more than it intends and certainly more than the mere humor with which critics so often associate it. Epstein's incisive depiction of Chaucer as an Orientalist remains, for the purpose of his study, at the philological level. Yet attention to the tale's action, specifically its violent end, and what I will show is an enlightened close reading by the Cook suggest that its representation of northerners—a kind of doubling of the northern other—works against its implied nationalist aims. Patricia Clare Ingham explains that “Freud's ‘uncanny’ resonates with the submission required by national communities,”¹⁹ that nations fantasize their unity through acts of doubling wherein the problematic other is domesticated into the larger community. Literary critics like Ingham have discovered numerous rich and complex examples of this “psychoanalytic logic” to nationalism in medieval vernacular romances, but I argue that we can find it in Chaucer's fabliaux as well. This logic reverberates in the *Reeve's Tale*, but it does so at a cost. Such doubling or mimicry, as Homi Bhabha has taught us, “must continually produce [the other's]

¹⁹ Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 208. Ingham gestures, here, towards the interplay of the uncanny and issues of political nationhood, of national ideology, and foreignness in the work of Homi K. Bhabha (see notes 20 and 38 below) and Julia Kristeva (notably *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991]).

slippage, its excess, its difference,”²⁰ and in Chaucer’s second fabliau the representation of the two clerks brings with it the full and frightening weight of northern strangeness, a grave threat to Chaucer’s national imagination. If in mimicking northerners the *Reeve’s Tale* aims at a literary surmounting of northern otherness to the benefit of the English nation, then that doubling produces instead a menacing North that undoes Chaucer’s project altogether.

Unsettling Geographies, or “Not Far From Cambridge”

Elements of the uncanny, of the familiar and unfamiliar, overwhelm the *Reeve’s Tale* and its context. Ignoring Cambridge as the *locus amoenus* of his story, the obvious rebuttal to the Miller’s Oxford setting, the Reeve instead takes us all to Trumpington. The quitting game between the Miller and Reeve obscures the fact that this quarrel is not specifically Cambridge set against Oxford. Oswald provides some mundane details of the place—a “brooke,” “brigge,” and “mille” (I.3922-3)—and we are assured that Trumpington is “nat fer fro Cantebrigge” (I.3921). Yet the tiny crossroads is *not* Cambridge, denying us the surer footing of a town setting similar to that of the *Miller’s Tale*’s “at Oxenford” (I.3187). If we consider the pilgrims’ place at this moment in the *Canterbury Tales*, then we realize that the Reeve’s audience is between Southwark and Greenwich (“Lo Grenewych, ther many a shrewe is inne!” [I.3907]), listening to a stranger from “Biside ... Baldeswelle” (I.620) tell a tale that takes place “nat fer from Cantebrigge.” The pilgrim route to Canterbury is well known and Trumpington is not

²⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 122.

unknown, but the geography in and around the *Reeve's Tale* remains unsettling. This always liminal status is illustrated further in the sequence of descriptors that inform John's and Aleyn's origins in the North. The clerks are "from a town heichte Strother" (I.4014), but if we find any surety of place here, it dissolves in the Reeve's "I kan nat telle where" (I.4015).

The clerks' vague origins should not obscure the fact that, like their narrator, they intimate London connections. This stems from the role served frequently by their college in service of the crown's administrative works in London. John and Aleyn arrive at Symkyn's mill from the "greet collegge ... / Men clepen the Soler Halle" (I.3989-90), which Alan Cobban long ago suggested refers to the King's Hall at Cambridge. The King's Hall garnered a substantial portion of its scholars from Yorkshire.²¹ Founded by Edward II as the Society of King's Scholars and endowed by Edward III, the college "seems always to have been intended to provide a supply of graduates in both ecclesiastical and secular spheres particularly for the king's service."²² The clerks, then, may have been common to London, employed in the Chancery or any

²¹ Alan B. Cobban, *The King's Hall Within the University of Cambridge in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), 157-59. Only the county of Norfolk provided a greater number of students. As Cobban finds, from the period 1317-1443, the two counties provide one quarter of the 203 scholars whose geographic origins might be identified by surnames, remarkable given that scholars over this period arrive from thirty-six different counties.

²² Derek Brewer, "The Reeve's Tale and the King's Hall, Cambridge," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 311-12.

number of other services. As Cobban further allows, “Even if Chaucer did not actually visit the college (although he may very well have done), his close court connections and career as a royal servant make it more than likely that some of the King’s Scholars would have been numbered among his acquaintance.”²³ Walking about London speaking in his regional tongue, a northern “soler halle” scholar like John or Aleyn might be seen paradoxically as both familiar and strange, not unlike the Norfolk Reeve.

Given this discussion of immigrants in London, it is telling that the *Cook’s Prologue* and *Tale* immediately follow the *Reeve’s*. The Cook indeed is the only one who laughs at its conclusion. The pilgrims, who “for the moore part ... loughe and pleyde” (I.3858) at the *Miller’s Tale’s* end, sit silently as the Cook of London chuckles: “Ha! ha!” (I. 4327). If we continue with the *Cook’s Prologue*, however, his laughter is explained. His affinity for Flemish proverbs —“sooth pley, quaad pley” (I.4357)— points to his comfort with London immigrants. In other words, he is the only one who gets the Reeve; he is the only one who would be comfortable with Norfolk men, northerners, and Flemings in London. Yet, this is because the Cook was himself once an immigrant, who has now seemingly settled permanently in the city. Twice called the “Cook of London,” Roger, in his own words, hails from Ware, a town north of London in Hertfordshire that, as David Wallace has explained, staged significant resistance to the Statue of Laborers in the 1350s and whose citizens played a prominent role in the events of 1381 (notably sacking John of Gaunt’s palace at the Savoy). As Wallace

²³ Cobban, *The King’s Hall*, 16.

suggests, “The name of Ware comes freighted with suggestions of unruliness or violence imported to the city from the provinces.”²⁴ We must wonder whether the Cook’s amicable gestures towards the Reeve imply more sinister collusion between the two in the future.

What might the *Cook’s Tale* have offered on the topic of strangers not merely lurking in Trumpington or at the Scottish marches but within the city itself? The centrality of Roger of Ware and his penchant for alien proverbs foreground the reality of, and the ideological concerns for, the foreigner, the stranger, or the alien within London. Symkyn is offensive for his local scheme, a dishonest miller who steals from the folks and institutions of the surrounding Cambridge countryside and who aims to better himself and his family through “hooly chirches” wealth. If Symkyn operates far from the city in the tale, the London associations of the Reeve, the two clerks, and the Cook intimate that the Cambridge miller might take his thieving to the capital sooner rather than later. Each of these strangers provoke anxiety for the multiple geographies that inhere in them and for the uncanny way their “real” and textual personas are conflated—the manner in which details of their descriptions allude to the “strange” in London. They come to embody marginalized communities enfolded over the English center.

²⁴ David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 167.

The Local and the National, Fabliau and Romance

In pitting northerners against “deynous Symkyn” (I.3941), the *Reeve’s Tale* aims to achieve the containment of both. Symkyn’s character offends in numerous ways. His “hosen of the same” (I.3955) color as his wife’s “gyte of reed” (I.3954), his base occupation (“A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele” [I.3939]), and his plot to marry his virgin daughter “Into som worthy blood of auncetrye” (I.3982) leave little doubt that he is a despicable character. The Reeve overwhelms us with his description, nearly eighty of the tale’s 404 lines. The two clerks, John and Aleyn are meant to stymie Symkyn’s social disruption, much as the Reeve aims to “Stynt [the] clappe!” (I.3144) of the pilgrim Miller when he interrupts the story-telling contest. Looked at in this way, the tale adumbrates a North in service to the greater English nation, symbolically quelling the social unrest of Symkyn’s local quasi-rebellion and putting Symkyn in his proper place quietly grinding corn.

The Man of Law’s Tale offers a similar example of such juxtaposition, where the contiguity of two others, Syria and Northumberland, is used towards gentrifying one of them. Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes that the two pagan locales “highlight the variable nature of strangeness,” but Northumberland “goes on to become not only a Christian country but part of England itself. It is both strange (then) and familiar (now).”²⁵ The

²⁵ Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “Orientation and Nation in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*,” in *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn Lynch (New York: Routledge, 2002), 121; Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World*, 27-45, explains a similar if much earlier instance of this kind of narrative appropriation of the North. Analyzing Ælfric’s account

nearness of exotic Syria enhances Northumberland's conversion over the course of the tale as it is brought into the English fold. In multifarious ways, the *Reeve's Tale's* local and contained settings—a fabliau at a miller's tiny house just beyond the small village of Trumpington—nevertheless pursue similar interests. *The Reeve's Tale*, as numerous scholars have rightly suggested, attends to the shifting nature of the English economy whose participants come from a burgeoning middle class. The tale aims to make familiar the peasant other signified through Symkyn, to put him in his place.²⁶ But it is also preoccupied with the fragility of an emergent English nation. It seems subtly to ask, “What about the North?” Indeed, *The Reeve's Tale* combines its interests in the local

of the slave children from the northern kingdom of Deira, whose beauty and mystery prompt the future Pope Gregory I to send the missionary Augustine to Britain in 597, Lavezzo claims, “The synechdocal role of Deira as a sign of the whole of England in the slave-boy homily ... imaginatively resolves the separation of Northumbria from England during Aelfric's lifetime” (41). Aelfric's recapitulation, then, incorporates a region “regressive” in its resistance to the institutional Anglo-Saxon church” (41).

²⁶ See, for example, the work of William F. Woods, notably *Chaucerian Spaces: Spatial Poetics in Chaucer's Opening Tales* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008); Elizabeth Edwards, “The Economics of Justice in Chaucer's *Miller's* and *Reeve's Tales*,” *The Dalhousie Review* 82 (2002): 91-112; Alcuin Blamires, “Chaucer the Reactionary: Ideology and The General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Review of English Studies* 51 (2000): 523-39; Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991). For Patterson, the Reeve subverts the Miller's “peasant consciousness” by revealing the “disunity within the peasant class itself” (274).

and the national, each of which testifies to the internal liminality of the English nation-state in the late fourteenth century.

The national implications underlying gestures to the English North in the *Reeve's Tale* seem beyond the realism, moral subversion, and atmosphere of game typical of the fabliau.²⁷ Various circumstances brought the North to the forefront of late fourteenth-century English politics at the very same time that the country wrestled with the destabilization of the monarchy and chronic war with France and Scotland. Richard II, defiantly playing upon the social phenomenon of the North-South divide, moved the Bench and Chancery to York in 1392, as Helen Jewell notes, to “spite London.”²⁸

²⁷ In his seminal study of the French influence on Chaucer, Muscatine finds the literature of the bourgeois tradition, within which he includes fabliau, to be “‘realistic’ or ‘naturalistic’” in the sense that it “[deals] with life directly, with something of life’s natural shape and vitality”; it is, further, “full of exaggeration, of caricature and grotesque imagination” that “finds its easiest subject in low life.” Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957), 59; Benson echoes Muscatine in his introduction to the *Miller's Tale* in the *Riverside Chaucer*, where he describes the fabliaux as “a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes” (7). In his admittedly “elephantine description,” Erik Hertog defines the fabliau as “a stylized short narrative in a predominantly materialist semantic register, involving mostly stock bourgeois, lower-class and clerical characters in rigidly programmed plots of far-fetched, humorous and often sexual deceptions and retaliations, governed by local space and clock-time, and often concluded with a moral.” Hertog, *Chaucer's Fabliaux As Analogues* (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1991), 3.

²⁸ Jewell, *The North-South Divide*, 42-44.

Bowers, further, suggests that the move was “an early experiment at distancing the offices of government as well as the king’s familia from the antagonistic southeastern counties.”²⁹ Richard also brought several northerners into his intimate circle including the soon-to-be-deposed English Chancellor Michael de la Pole from Hull, whose brother (perhaps ironically) owned a water mill at Trumpington.³⁰

It is not, then, far-fetched to suggest that such events informed Chaucer’s northern consciousness as he wrote the *Canterbury Tales*, though it is remarkable that it should emerge first in a brief fabliau. But the *Reeve’s Tale* does not lend itself to such a

²⁹ Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl*, 73-74. Bowers also discusses at length Richard’s obsession with Cheshire, his surrounding himself (quite literally) with Cheshire men, and his rumoured intent to “make Cheshire the inner citadel of the nation, a central bastion from which to rule Wales and Ireland as well as England” (74). Such a revelation only heightens the anxieties of Londoners like Chaucer who aimed both to declare and maintain the capital as England’s hegemonic center.

³⁰ Britton J. Harwood suggests that Chaucer has in mind various historical figures and events, including the Peasant’s Revolt, when he writes *the Reeve’s Tale*. Important here is Harwood’s assertion that Edmund de la Pole, who owned a water mill at Trumpington from 1372 and was the brother of the former chancellor of England Michael de la Pole, is the signified for Symkyn’s mill in this tale of overtly political imperatives. Harwood correlates various figures, including Chaucer himself, with the tale’s characters (some multiple times—Chaucer is both Symkyn and the clerks), and suggests that the clerks’ northern dialect is one of many ways Pole’s identity is “displaced,” since the Poles “for three generations came from Hull and Yorkshire.” Harwood, “Psychoanalytic Politics: Chaucer and Two Peasants,” *English Literary History* 68 (2001): 10.

strict interpretation of the genre as does its counterpart, the *Miller's Tale*. V.A. Kolve has said, "Although Chaucer's program calls for us to hear two fabliaux in a row, he avoids the mere repetition of mood and material by altering almost totally the context in which we hear the second."³¹ Speaking specifically of Arthurian romance, Ingham argues that "medieval community is imagined not through homogeneous stories of a singular 'people,' but through narratives of sovereignty as a negotiation of differences, of ethnicity, region, language, class, and gender."³² Her comment is applicable to romance more broadly, and it complements Geraldine Heng's explanation of romance as a genre whose "objects of attention are crises of collective and communal identity—the identity of the emerging medieval nation of England."³³ But the *Reeve's Tale* demonstrates itself an attention to such crises. In a moment revealing of its national consciousness, the *Reeve's Tale* subtly gestures towards romance through an overlooked correlation with the *Knight's Tale*.³⁴

³¹ V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1984), 224.

³² Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 9.

³³ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), 3.

³⁴ See Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux* (Geneva: Droz, 1971). Nykrog famously illustrates the proximity, at times overlap, of romance and fabliau: the fabliau as a "caricature burlesque" of the courtly romance. What I hope this essay demonstrates is that the fabliau aspires to more than simple parody; rather, that more pressing concerns of the local and national might underlie the explicit comedy of the fabliau.

Symkyn patronizes the clerks, who come to the miller's house to solicit lodging after a long day chasing their loosed horse through the fens. Symkyn challenges them in their own clerkly terms—to “make a place / A myle brood of twenty foot of space” (I.4123-24). Numerous critics follow the logic that Symkyn's mocking equation stems explicitly from the town and gown rivalry we witness in the *Miller's Tale*. But I would offer an alternative reading here: Symkyn's metaphoric “myle brood” house finds its precursor in Theseus's “noble theatre” (I.1885) in the *Knight's Tale*, whose “circuit a myle was aboute” (I.1887). Theseus's arena signifies his power over his subjects in the act of its construction, in its sheer physical presence, and its function. It literally surrounds not just Athenian citizens, but prisoners and foreign armies. It becomes a site of naturalization, of gentrifying those who are unfamiliar, strange, and offensive. Theseus, according to William Woods, embodies “a world of chivalry where princes' wills preserve the order of things inherited from old times.”³⁵ But if Theseus “tempers the chivalric with the domestic,”³⁶ then he also, specifically, domesticates the foreign, an ethic that informs Chaucer's own interests in London's strangers, including those surrounding the *Reeve's Prologue* and *Tale*: the Reeve, the two clerks, and the Cook. Though he tears down the walls of Thebes, Theseus encloses the leftover Thebans, Palamoun and Arcite, in the Athenian walls of his prisonhouse. His marriage to Hypolita, his inquisition of the crying Theban widows—“why that ye been clothed thus

³⁵ Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, 16

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

in black” (I.911)—his conquest of Creon for the Theban king’s strange treatment of dead bodies, and, again, his war theater, all serve to render knowable, and consequently safe, the alien other. The two Theban princes, Palamoun and Arcite, are supported by whole armies of “straunge” men—under the “kyng of Trace” (I.2129) and the “kyng of Inde” (I.2156), men carrying a “Pruce sheeld” (I.2122) or the “clooth of Tars” (I.2160). Theseus masterfully surrounds these foreign forces with his theater where his own Athenian citizens, his true subjects, observe and, thus, come to know these exotics in the context of *safe* entertainment.³⁷

The narrator-Knight performs his own naturalizing act in the description of the two armies, linking the foreign, mercenary knights of Palamoun’s and Arcite’s forces with domestic, English knights:

For if ther felle tomorwe swich a cas,
 Ye knowen wel that every lusty knyght
 That loveth paramours and hath his might,
 Were it in Engelond or elleswhere,
 They wolde, hir thanks, wilnen to be there. (I.2110-14)

A hypothetical “Were it in Engelond” modifies the “cas” of fighting for Emelye’s hand, yet it also informs “every lusty knyght.” Chaucer’s English Knight speaks for fellow “lusty” English compatriots who, because of their devotion to “paramours,” would take

³⁷ For further analysis of this impulse in the *Canterbury Tales*, see John Flyer, “Domesticating the Exotic in *The Squire’s Tale*,” *English Literary History* 55 (1988): 1-26.

up this competition whether it was conveniently at home in England or elsewhere. His interjection makes the foreign armies more English.

We expect such explicit colonial discourse from a romance like the *Knight's Tale*. Yet this attention to crises and the resultant domesticating impulse witnessed in the *Knight's Tale* is at work in the *Reeve's Tale* as well. The everyday concerns of the fabliau become, as Bhabha might describe them, "[t]he scraps, patches, and rags of daily life [that] must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates[sic] a growing circle of national subjects."³⁸ Symkyn means his house to become, like Theseus's arena, a sign of his own triumphs over the clerks, but his dwelling also becomes an arena of sorts in which a contest between strangers plays out. In the baser rivalries typical of the fabliau, Chaucer's attention to the nation reemerges. John responds to Symkyn's mocking provocation to "make rowm of speche" with another of the tale's northernisms: "by

³⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 297. Though vernacular fabliaux had not caught on in Chaucer's England by the late fourteenth century, the genre cast a large shadow in European literature of the later Middle Ages. Of fabliau narratives and the genre broadly, Hertog clarifies, "whatever form they took, it was always a dominant, 'official' literary form never a marginal or trivial one, neither formally, nor thematically, or functionally." Hertog, *Chaucer's Fabliaux As Analogues*, 3. Viewing the fabliaux in this way, as a popular and dominant literary form, connotes the potential for power and persuasion latent in their construction. What better vehicle for Chaucer's own national consciousness than such a popular literature?

Seint Cutberd, / Ay is thou myrie, and this is faire answerd. / I have herd seyde, ‘Man sal
 taa of twa thynges: / Slyk as he fyndes, or taa slyk as he brynges” (I.4127-30). If we
 have forgotten their northernness by this point in the tale, John’s evocation of the
 northern St Cuthbert and his curious maxim spoken in northern inflections remind us
 that the miller brings clerks more strange than usual into his home. This second smaller
 amphitheater will aim to naturalize the strange clerks. Contrary to John’s dictum,
 however, these northerners take both what they find and what they bring.

Northern Doppelgängers

In the miller’s house, Symkyn and the northern clerks—“Right in the same chambre by
 and by” (I.4143)—confront each other blindly, “for it was derk” (I.4225), and the day
 ends badly for the miller. Darkness necessitates the tale’s bedroom melee and seems
 almost to activate the frightening turn in the clumsy northerners, who then prey on the
 wife and daughter. Noting Freud’s lexical investigation of the term “uncanny,” Nicholas
 Royle admits, “Darkness is a factor that stares us in the face ... when it comes to
 considering the various dictionary definitions of ‘heimlich’ and ‘unheimlich.’”³⁹ Freud
 notes a particular passage, for example, “The *unheimliche*, fearful hours of night.”⁴⁰ But
 darkness here, as a literal lack of sight or blindness, equates further to a figurative
 sightlessness. Freud remembers F. W. J. Schelling’s definition of the uncanny “as

³⁹ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 108.

⁴⁰ Freud, *Standard Edition*, 224.

something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.”⁴¹ This slippage in Freud’s discussion from literal darkness to figurative blindness reverberates in the action of the *Reeve’s Tale*. Susan Yager points out that the *Reeve’s Tale* “contains numerous references to visual perception, especially examples of hindered or restricted sight,” and Helen Cooper witnesses in the tale “linked ideas of illusion, understanding, and blindness.”⁴² The tale’s violent shift in the bedroom seems brought on by the lack of light. Woods tellingly notes at this moment in the narrative a “freedom” that unleashes the clerks’ “‘natural’ aggression,” their animalism.⁴³ One is reminded of a story Freud recounts, in which a young couple stumbles around in the dark of their new flat fancying that they see something moving about the place. The implication is that the bizarre crocodiles carved into the couple’s table come to life in the darkness. Though Freud calls the story naïve, he still finds its effect remarkably uncanny.⁴⁴ Similarly, the darkness of the miller’s bedroom brings out the monstrous—a latent violent northernness—in the clerks.

In the climactic scene of the *Reeve’s Tale*, the clerks are not merely antagonists to Symkyn but his unwieldy doubles. Symkyn has spent part of the tale miming clerical

⁴¹ Ibid., 241.

⁴² Susan Yager, “‘A Whit Thyng In Hir Ye’”: Perception and Error in *The Reeve’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 28 (1994): 393; Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 115.

⁴³ Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, 59.

⁴⁴ Freud, *Standard Edition*, 244-45.

speech—his ironic proverb, for example, “The gretteste clerkes been noght wisest men” (I.4054). And the clerks have pursued milling—John will “se howgates corn gas in” (I.4037) and Aleyn notes “how that the mele falles down” (I.4042). But John and Aleyn do not come to double upon Symkyn until they inhabit the tiny confines of the dark bedroom. This doubling action most explicitly begins when Aleyn couples with the miller’s daughter, Malyne. Aleyn admittedly claims the daughter’s virginity as repayment for losses he has accrued, and in taking possession of her maidenhood, the very thing that Symkyn wields towards the refashioning of his own peasanthood, Aleyn comes to double on Symkyn himself. Malyne has been an instrument through which her father and grandfather, the village parson, play out their socially distorted designs. Now, however, she profits Aleyn by leading him to the clerks’ baked grain. Blinded by pride, much as Symkyn throughout the story, Aleyn climbs back into what he thinks is his own bed and proceeds to recount his sexual exploits unwittingly to the miller himself. Their ensuing fight sets off the tale’s final chaotic moments. Before his own undoing, however, Symkyn quite literally reshapes Aleyn into his own image: “And on the nose he smoot hym with his fest. / Doun ran the bloody streem upon his brest; / And in the floor, with nose and mouth tobroke, / They walwe as doon two pigges in a poke” (I.4275-78). Symkyn gives Aleyn the “kamus nose” (I.3974) he and his daughter notably wear, and the miller and clerk then fall into a pile indistinguishable as “two pigges in a poke.”

Remaking the room by moving the cradle, John takes up the place of Symkyn, even the place of the miller's bed. John, further, doubles Symkyn quite literally, taking his place atop the miller's wife in copulation. Like the diminutive hero of Chaucer's mock romance *Sir Thopas*, who "pryked as he were wood" (VII.774), John "priketh harde and depe as he were mad" (I.4231), performing, as Woods cleverly notes, a sexual grinding that parallels Symkyn's milling.⁴⁵ John's sporting with the wife seems both funny and frightening. Daniel Pigg, however, reads the description of John's lovemaking unambiguously as "[transforming] the sexual coupling into an act of violence."⁴⁶ Such a reading reflects back on Aleyn's own lovemaking.

The analogues to the *Reeve's Tale* all involve some sort of complicity on the part of the miller's daughter, whether this be her clear acceptance of the clerk into her bed or, in the case of *De Gombert et des II clers* and *Le Meunier et les deux clers*, a faux ring taken from a cooking pan meant to express the clerk's earnestness to her.⁴⁷ Diverging from these earlier tales, Chaucer's version suggests a darker crime:

And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.

This wenche lay uprighte and faste slepte,

⁴⁵ Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, 53.

⁴⁶ Daniel F. Pigg, "Performing the Perverse: The Abuse of Masculine Power in *the Reeve's Tale*," in *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Peter Beidler (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 59.

⁴⁷ See *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1971).

Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,
That it had been to late for to crie,
And shortly for to seyn, they were aton. (I.4193-97)

Aleyn does not proposition Malyne with words or ring, but rather simply attacks her so fast that she cannot even cry out. The question of rape here may never be answered, and Malyne's near weeping at Aleyn's dawn departure challenges the argument altogether.⁴⁸ Yet Pigg sees her crying as "recognition that she could not possibly prove it now," and other readings of the scene by Elaine Tuttle Hansen and Tamarah Kohanski, without hesitation, speak of "the Reeve's description of the rape of Malyne."⁴⁹ Most recently, Nicole Nolan Sidhu clarifies that though rape is not uncommon to the fabliau "[t]he violence suggested in Chaucer's description of the episode diverges from fabliau

⁴⁸ See R. E. Kaske, "An Aube in the Reeve's Tale," *English Literary History* 26 (1959) 295-31. Kaske refutes sympathetic readings of the miller's daughter, suggesting instead that the parting speeches between Malyne and Aleyn were parodies of the aube or dawn-song, parodies that inform the lowliness of both the clerk's and the daughter's characters. His essay offers a brilliant comparative reading of *The Reeve's Tale's* aube with the medieval tradition of the dawn-song, yet Kaske does not study the lines preceding the night of sex, the lines of Aleyn's approaching Malyne, which I think are essential to interpreting the entirety of the scene's intentions.

⁴⁹ Pigg, "Performing the Perverse," 58; Elaine Tuttle Hansen contends that although Malyne and her mother "do seem to enjoy sex" *the Reeve's Tale* argues that "women are literally as well as metaphorically dangerous, wittingly or unwittingly." Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1992), 242; Tamarah Kohanski, "In Search of Malyne," *Chaucer Review* 27 (1993): 228-38.

representations of rape, which tend to soft-pedal sexual assault as a comical matter, devoid of sorrow or pain.”⁵⁰ These acts of violence complicate the tale’s aim to domesticate the northern other and illustrate the slippages that are always the product of doubling.

For Symkyn, bringing the clerks into his home was to conclude his labor of both making the clerks more peasant-like as he himself is and, at the same time, making himself more clerical. Subsumed into his domestic space, the clerks are initially what Symkyn would have them be: doubles of himself that are ambivalently the same as him, yet inferior. In this way, they symbolically affirm the continuation of his thievery and his livelihood. This is akin to Freud’s own explanation of the double, citing the work of Otto Rank, as a defense against annihilation.⁵¹ But the excess violence adhering in Aleyn’s rape and the excess pleasure the wife derives from John’s unSymkyn-like lovemaking forebode the miller’s demise. We realize the moment when the double in its slippages and difference becomes, as Freud terms it, “the uncanny harbinger of death” in the little bit of light that permeates the miller’s bedroom.⁵²

In the final scene of the tale, the “litel shymeryng of a light” (I.4297) from the moon effects a process of unfortunate enlightenment. Royle concedes, “It is not so much darkness itself ... but the process of ceasing to be dark, the process of revelation

⁵⁰ Nicole Nolan Sidhu, “‘To Late for to Crie’: Female Desire, Fabliau Politics, and Classical Legend in Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale*,” *Exemplaria* 21 (2009): 8-12.

⁵¹ Freud, *Standard Edition*, 234-35.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 235.

or bringing to light that is uncanny.”⁵³ In the newfound clarity of the bedroom, the full weight of the clerks violent turn comes to fruition, and this is contributed to by one last derivative of fabliau comedy. Symkyn’s wife commits a last act of misrecognition:

And whan she gan the white thyng espye,
She wende the clerk hadde wered a volupeer,
And with the staf she drow ay neer and neer,
And wende han hit this Aleyn at the fulle,
And smoot the millere on the pyled skulle. (I.4302-4306)

Like a “crack of doom,” this figurative deathblow signals the end of Symkyn as we know him—he cries, “Harrow! I dye!” (I.4307)—his larger-than-peasant body, his own strangeness, reduced to mere normalcy. Ironically, the promise of light in an otherwise dark room provokes the wife’s misguided blow, a point that only further illustrates the fragility of sight intrinsic in the uncanny and rehearsed throughout the *Reeve’s Tale*. In the “white thyng,” the bald head mistaken for a clerk’s voluper, she cannot recognize the familiar from the strange.

Stunned by her blow, Symkyn is helpless as the clerks “beete hym weel and lete hym lye” (I.4308), but by their own final violent act, the tale’s investment in the North has soured. *The Reeve’s Tale* aims to surmount northern otherness through the comedy of regional speech and through the quitting of the economic other, Symkyn, but the violence the clerks perpetrate implies a decidedly unfunny remainder of the North that

⁵³ Royle, *The Uncanny*, 108.

redoubles not only on the miller but on the tale's nationalist impulse. The North becomes what Bhabha would describe as the "double vision that is the result of ... the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object."⁵⁴ The clerks' assault on the Symkyn family does not merely fail to naturalize their northernness; it infects the miller's family with strangeness. As in numerous anxieties about the sexual prowess of the ethnic or cultural stranger that proliferate throughout western history, Aleyn's invasion is one that fuses his strange northern body to the non-northern woman; and she takes pleasure in it. The wife's confusion at the gratification she derives from John—she too finds it pleasurable—further underlines the dangerous possibilities inherent in the stranger's presence. John's act defuses Symkyn's overt masculinity making him strange to his wife, "So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore" (I.4230). At the same time, wife and daughter are figuratively converted in what Gila Aloni calls a "series of optical errors and confusions that ... reveal that those whom Symkyn believes to be the most intimate to him—his private property, his wife and daughter—are the most foreign to him."⁵⁵ Herein lies the significance of the Cook's laughter.

Knife, North, and Nation

The Cook, in a fit, chuckles, "For Cristes passion, / This millere hadde a sharp conclusion / Upon his argument of herbergage!" (I.4327-29). These lines are frequently glossed as referring back to the moments of Symkyn's anticlericism, when he mocks the

⁵⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 89.

⁵⁵ Gila Aloni, "Extimacy in the *Miller's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 175-76.

two Cambridge clerks for their “lerved art” (I.4122) and challenges them of his house to “make it rowm of speche” (I.4126). It seems, thus, that Symkyn the “gylour” is “hymself bigyled” (I.4321). Yet the miller’s bad experience with lodgers, his “sharp conclusion,” is not merely mock-philosophic. If we consider Symkyn’s description in the *Reeve’s Tale*’s opening lines, we then realize that the Cook’s close reading might mean something quite different, that he indeed alludes to Symkyn’s own knife with his modifying “sharpness.” The arsenal of blades is so prominent in the Reeve’s sketch of him:

Ay by his belt he baar a long panade,
 And of a swerd ful trenchant was the blade.
 A joly poppere baar he in his pouche;

.....

A Sheffield thwitel baar he in his hose. (I.3929-31, I.3933)

What lies subtly among these weapons is actually the tale’s first evocation of the English North: the “Sheffield thwitel,” a detail of the Reeve’s knowledge of the North that signifies much like the clerks’ own dialect. The Cook’s facetious remark tellingly links that northern blade with the northern clerks. Ironically, like the men within the *Knight’s Tale*’s amphitheater who wear Tarsian cloths and Prussian shields, Symkyn bears a weapon exotic in its own insular way. Lingering “in his hose,” the northern knife prefigures the miller’s demise. Indeed, Symkyn carries the North in his pants, and the irony should not be lost. The Sheffield steel, familiar as a weapon on which Symkyn

depends for protection and, more, for intimidation, figuratively redounds upon him in the northern students' violent attack on the miller and his family.

The knife, however, gestures beyond the tale itself, offering what can be seen as a fitting caveat about the North of England. In his own prologue, the Cook responds to Symkyn's fate with a Biblical admonition: "'Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous,' / For herberwyng by nyghte is perilous. / Wel oghte a man avysed for to be" (I.4331). The imperative is explicit: one shouldn't be flippant about the one he allows into his home. But the Cook's careful attention to the Reeve's story, more careful than we would expect, highlights the northernness lurking in the tale, and his point about the miller's "sharp conclusioun" suggests a more complex exegesis of Solomon's proverb on "herbergage." The Cook's "by nyghte" implies both the literal and figurative darkness that facilitates the violent assaults in Symkyn's bedroom. This is the uncanny effect of darkness, one's "being in the dark," unaware of who or what stands in front of them or who sleeps beside them ("Right in the same chambre by and by" [I.4143]). Such darkness might not allow "a man avysed for to be," just as Symkyn's arrogance blinds him towards the dangerous potential of the two bumbling Cambridge students, just as he carries a northern blade on him each day. A question, then, emerges that reflects on the ambivalence of the medieval North: what can one do about the "man" already in one's house, the man whose motives are shadowed and to whose potentialities one is blind?

The Cook's close reading reminds the tale's audience that the North is already within the borders of England, in "thyn hous," as are the northern clerks in Symkyn's dwelling and the northern blade in his pants. Symkyn inadvertently replaces his northern blade with two northern pricks that ravish both his wife and daughter and leave him in a bloody heap. The excess of violence that inheres in the final scene exposes traces of the frightening North, a brutality that might recoil upon non-northerners who blindly expect its protection at the boundaries of their realm, much as Symkyn's knife comes back on him. In juxtaposing the North with the more immediate social threat in Symkyn, Chaucer's tale desires to know the North, to affirm its place in an expanding English community, but the uncanny region both complicates and disturbs these desires. If Symkyn has threatened the local Cambridge economy, then the North, signified in the two clerks, threatens England's economy of nation.

In the figures of the Reeve and his clerks we witness Chaucer's regionalism, his writing from the center, in service of its apparent opposite, nationalism. But by depicting such troubling yet common strangers, Chaucer illustrates, perhaps unwittingly, the pressures under which his own ideological narrative succumbs. His nationalist text is riven by difference at the very moment it evokes the North, northerners, and northernness, the great other at England's margins where difference waits to reemerge and envelop the center. Chaucer's failure to hold onto the North in his tale further enlivens the regionality of Symkyn, the Reeve and the Cook. Chaucer's attempt to bring the North and other "strangers" into the fold in fact reverses the

figurative centeredness of the pilgrims as a whole. Rather than bringing England together “from every shires ende,” the emergence of the uncanny North in the *Reeve’s Tales* aids the redistribution of regional identity to the gathered pilgrims. No longer are they signifiers of a multi-polar England subsumed into a single body and marching towards salvation in Canterbury; instead, they reflect the still disembodied state of the English nation, colluding, crashing into, and repulsing one another, wilting along the road of a never-ending journey towards redemption. If Chaucer sees his own region in the Southeast as a center whose unity will reflect out towards the margins of the realm, his preoccupation with the North suggests that what is reflected back at Chaucer is instead the very impossibility of that wholeness; rather than a city wiped clean of difference, London is instead populated by a mesh of Norfolk men, Ware men, northern scholars, Flemings, and other miscreants who defile the purity of a conceptual English nation.

National narratives must work to deny and hide these ruptures, and we might view such intentions in the *Reeve’s Tale’s* contemplation of the North and the ensuing repetitions of the North in the *Canterbury Tales*, but they are already undone the moment Symkyn’s northern blade is named. This is why all of the anxiety and fear provoked by the Reeve and his clerks does not add up for the “hilarious nonsense” so often read into the tale’s “brilliant connotative linguistic joke,” a joke Chaucer’s

audience according to critics is supposed to have found “excruciatingly funny.”⁵⁶ We might suppose that Chaucer does imagine an English nation in the *Canterbury Tales*, and in those tales where he considers the North, his fantasies are most promising and yet problematic at the same time. The uncanny North, in its familiarity, intimates the productive possibilities of national fantasy, but in its horror, it only threatens to render sterile such desires—an imagined community snuffed out by the “Sheffield Thwitel.

⁵⁶ Garbáty, “Satire and Regionalism,” 6-7; E. T. Donaldson, *Chaucer’s Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, 2d ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1975), 1071.

Chapter Four

“‘Me longeth sore to Bernysdale’: Centralization, Resistance and the Bare Life of the Greenwood in *A Gest of Robyn Hode*”

Chaucer is the seminal voice of a new London literature, and in the fifteenth century, following his death, he becomes the face of a national language and literature.¹ But Chaucer’s canonical status, even in the Middle Ages, does not obscure other regional voices that participate in a national dialectic. More popular and widespread than the works of Chaucer in the fourteenth and fifteenth century were stories about the forest outlaw Robin Hood. If Chaucer is posthumously subsumed into the national imagination, a London author who becomes the “Father of English Poetry,” then Robin Hood maintains a distinct regional identity despite his broad popularity throughout the realm in the dramas and, particularly, the ballads of the fifteenth century. As we witnessed in chapter two, local conflict between northerners and southerners such as that at the medieval universities of England can nevertheless escalate to a national drama that necessitates the King’s intervention. The fifteenth-century Robin Hood ballads show as much. These works juxtapose the conspicuous figure of the northern outlaw with England’s sovereign in a series of narratives that not only evidence shifting class structures in medieval England but also the government’s assertion of centralized power and its wresting of independence from the North once and for all.

¹ See John Fisher, “A Language Policy For Lancastrian England,” *PMLA* 107 (1992): 1168-1180; see also A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

In the eighth fytt of *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, the famous outlaw and his “seven score of wyght yonge men” (1555) emerge from the forest of Barnsdale with the King of England himself, all dressed in “Lyncolne grene” (1685) and “Shotynge all in fere, / Towarde the towne of Notyngham” (1687).² No image is more striking in this lengthy ballad than that of the King and the outlaw riding side by side, engaged in a friendly game of “pluck and buffet.”³ Certainly the citizens of Nottingham do not find it all in good fun. Unable to distinguish the monarch, who has dressed himself in Robin’s characteristic livery, the townspeople cry, “I drede our kynge be slone; / Come Robyn Hode to the towne, iwys / On lyve he lefte never one” (1710-12). Chaos ensues as “Fuly hastily they began to fle” (1713) until they perceive King Edward unharmed and laughing at their misguided terror. Robin Hood, here, does not resemble a base outlaw or even a crime boss of some larger organized gang. Riding down from the North, side by side with the King, followed by his liveried and paid army, and striking fear in southerly Nottingham, Robin Hood signifies a great northern magnate, one of the “Kings in the North” who ruled the region for much of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the very period in which the *Gest* was composed.

² All quotations from the early ballads of Robin Hood and from *The Tale of Gamelyn* are taken from *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

³ Pluck and buffet is a shooting game (one “plucks” the bow) in which the loser must take a punch (buffet) from the winner.

A Gest of Robyn Hode, Robin Hood and the Monk and *Robin Hood and the Potter* comprise the so-called “early” and medieval Robin Hood ballads. The latter two texts each exist in a single manuscript, but no manuscripts of the *Gest* are known. Although three fragments remain of an edition printed by Richard Pynson around 1495, the best early print of the *Gest* was made by Jan van Doesbrach in Antwerp around 1510 and was either preceded or reprinted by Wynkyn de Worde in London around this time.⁴ The *Gest* is far longer and more sophisticated in plot than its two counterparts, and the various episodes that comprise the ballad are taken to be some of the several Robin Hood stories circulating in written or oral form for almost two centuries before the *Gest*’s compiler pieced them together with his own original contributions or, at least, transitions between episodes. The *Gest* is comprised of 456 stanzas divided into eight fyfts. Masa Ikagami has shown that the language of the extant texts of the *Gest* clearly demonstrates North East Midland characteristics common to the general area of southern Yorkshire where the events in the ballad are said to have taken place.⁵ Although the dating of the printed texts is clear, critics have long debated the ballad’s actual period of origin, and all believe that the earliest printed version was based on an exemplar created a few to several decades prior. Arguing that the text itself was

⁴ Thomas Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 97-99. Ohlgren’s study provides a clear and thorough list of the early texts of the *Gest*.

⁵ Masa Ikegami, "The Language and the Date of *A Gest of Robyn Hode*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 96 (1995): 271-82.

compiled in the early to mid-fifteenth century during the reigns of either Henry V or Henry VI, Thomas Ohlgren suggests that the historical context of the stories themselves date from Edward III's reign.⁶ Similarly, David Fowler, R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, Douglas Gray, and Stephen Knight all push the date of the text's compilation forward to the later half of the fifteenth century, and Knight suggests, specifically, the reign of Edward IV.⁷

If the *Gest* is a fifteenth-century text, then it is also, beyond its linguistic provenance, a distinctly northern text as well. The narrative makes a number of distinctly northern geographic references. At the outset of the ballad, Robin tells Little John, Much the Miller's Son, and Will Scarlet to "walke up to the Saylis, / And so to Watlinge Strete / And wayte after some unkuth gest" (69-71). Later, disguised as an agreeable archer named Reynold Greenleaf, Little John tells the Sheriff of Nottingham

⁶ Thomas H. Ohlgren, "Edwardus Redivivus in *A Gest of Robyn Hode*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99 (2000): 2.

⁷ Aligning the narratives of the *Gest* with the outlaw activity of Edward III's early rule, J. R. Maddicott argues for a date of the 1330s. Maddicott, "The Birth and Settings of the Ballads of Robin Hood," in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Knight (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 233-55.; J. C. Holt argues that "probably by 1400" the tales that comprise the *Gest* were told to an array of audiences at different social levels. Holt, *Robin Hood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 111; Citing linguistic evidence and other historical allusions in the poem, Stephen Knight, however, places the *Gest* much nearer its extant printed copies, during the reign of Edward IV, in the second half of the fifteenth century. Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 75.

that he comes from “Holdernes” (593) in East Yorkshire. We learn at one point that Robin Hood has relieved Plumpton Park within “the compasse of Lancasshyre” (1425) of its deer, and in the ballad’s conclusion Robin Hood goes to his death at ”Kyrkely” (1815) in West Yorkshire. These place names refer to locations in northern England, and many point to the specific area of the Barnsdale forest that Robin and his men occupy in this and other ballads. But Robin Hood is not simply a local phenomenon. Stories of the outlaw prove popular around the English realm in the later Middle Ages. Famously, in the B-text of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (c. 1377), for instance, the figure Sloth claims, “I kan nou3t parfitly my Paternoster ... / But I kan rymes of Robyn hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre” (V.394-95).⁸ Plays of Robin Hood are known at Exeter as early as 1426-27,⁹ and, in a remarkably comical entry, a 1432 Parliament role for Wiltshire lists its members in vertically down the page as “Robyn/ hode/ Inne/ Grenewode/ Stode/ Godeman/ was/ hee/ lytel/ Joon/ Muchette/ Millersson/ Scathelok Reynoldyn.”¹⁰ While the extant textual evidence of a Robin Hood literature only date to the later fifteenth century, these examples among many testify to the outlaw’s entrenchment in the cultural fabric of late-medieval England.

Nevertheless, in their narratives these stories are tied to the North through place names and other allusions to the region. Speaking specifically of the early Robin Hood

⁸ *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: Athlone Press, 1975).

⁹ Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, 34.

¹⁰ Holt, *Robin Hood*, 69.

poems, R.B. Dobson and J. Taylor concede, “the association of Robin and his band of outlaws with a comparatively confined area of northern England is one of the most distinctive features of the greenwood ballads, a feature shared by few of the other items in the repertory of so-called traditional ballads.”¹¹ Given the literary stereotypes of the North throughout the Middle Ages, we should not be surprised to find the region—often depicted as “wild and untamed”—full of criminals and dangerous men.

A more sophisticated group of nobles actually ruled in the North: the northern magnates of whom the Percies and Nevilles are exemplars. The King charged these lords with defending the northern borders and generally keeping peace in the often-unruly region. These men were suited for the job because they maintained great private armies and held vast estates from which they drew political, economic and military power in the North. But like the region in which they ruled, these lords’ loyalty to the Crown was tenuous. The introduction to this study, as well as chapter one, discussed the staunch autonomy of the North of England in the immediate aftermath of the Norman Conquest. William the Conqueror was forced to confront the rebellious North, whose independent spirit resonated in the early revolts that led to the “harrying” in 1069-70. William of Malmesbury could not escape this northern spirit as he aimed to craft a distinctly unified vision of the new Anglo-Norman realm in the early twelfth century. Throughout the Middle Ages sentiments of autonomy never wane in the North, nor does

¹¹ R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), 25.

the North's spectral presence ever fail to cast its eerie shadow South. But the rise of the northern magnates, beginning with the Percies in the later fourteenth century, marks arguably the final significant chapter in the history of the medieval North-South divide. It constitutes a final surge in power and independence that, in fact, consumes itself by the end of the fifteenth century. In the intervening years, the military might and political presence of these magnates both comforts and threatens the rest of England. And it is their feuding with one another and the Crown that contributes to the turmoil engulfing England in the middle of the fifteenth century, the very same period from which *A Gest of Robyn Hode* emerges.

Reading it in a specifically fifteenth-century, northern context situates *A Geste of Robyn Hode* within one of the more turbulent ages of England's history. The later fifteenth century witnessed the Wars of the Roses, the decline of the Lancastrian monarchy, the rise and fall of the Yorkists, and the coming of the Tudors, but, perhaps just as significantly, the period saw the government itself undergo substantial and lasting centralization as the power of the monarch edged closer to the absolutism of Henry VIII. It was this centralization that spelled an end to the cantankerous and staunch independence of the North of England, whose autonomy was bound up in both its long history of rebellion and, more recently, in the provincial rule of its great magnates. In chapter three I examined the southerner Chaucer's ventriloquizing of northern students and his own working through anxieties about the North in the late fourteenth century; now I will analyze the *Gest* as a distinctly northern voice. Viewing

the *Gest* as a late fifteenth-century northern text reveals a distinct regionalism positioned against government and monarchical centralization and romanticizing a period wherein the northern magnate both served his king by protecting the borders of the realm and protected himself by serving the interests of his family and region. Moving towards London with the King at his side in the eighth fytt of the *Gest*, Robin Hood embodies this older form of lordship waning in the face of a sovereign absolutism that was conditioned by centralization. Robin Hood and King Edward's ride from the forest becomes the last gasp of mutual sovereignty based in mutuality between the King and his subject.

The North and Centralization

Centralization in the late fifteenth century significantly affected the fierce independence of the English North largely by wresting power from the great northern magnates who had ruled the region for over a century. Centralization affected the North so completely because of the unique situation of its governance, the exceptional manner by which the North remained a province within the realm of England yet, at the same time, worked as though another country altogether. Government in the North of England had differed for centuries from other parts of the country in its consolidation of rule to a few, select men and families. The palatinates of Chester, Lancaster, and Durham placed some or all responsibilities for local government in the hands of private individuals, for instance the bishop of Durham, rather than the Crown. The palatinates were, as Richard Lomas explains, "a decentralising institution that diminished the authority of central

government.”¹² Other than Durham, however, the palatinates did not have significant impact as independent territories within the political landscape of England—Chester and Lancaster, in particular, were in private hands for only fifty years before the Crown appropriated them.

More significant, the wardenships of the marches, which included families such as Greystoke, Clifford, and Percy, became an office through which a few northern families manifested their own largely autonomous rule and widened the already extant division between the North and the rest of England. Since war with Scotland was always eminent or ongoing from 1296 to the end of the Middle Ages, the Crown sought to protect the Scottish marches by creating the offices of march wardens, but to do so meant granting military and legal authority to a few powerful locals because they were the only ones who might draw enough support from the surrounding population to defend the border. Lomas explains the irony of these magnates’ power:

The consequence of this development was to give this small group of magnates an enhanced authority which enabled them to dominate lesser landowners ... [T]hey frequently intermarried to form a related clique, and they had no opposition in the form of magnates whose major interest lay outside the region but who had estates within it. Thus, an agency

¹² Richard Lomas, *North-East England in the Middle Ages* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1992), 75.

whose purpose was to enforce the crown's authority was tending to become the means of self-aggrandisement and independence.¹³

In many ways it was the almost unassailable authority of these magnates that provoked a gradual consolidation of government by the Crown from the rule of Richard II to that of Henry VIII, action that eventually snatched power from these few overmighty subjects. When the government and Crown resolved to seize this power back in the later fifteenth century, as R. R. Reid notes, they found “the concentration of authority in the hands of such lords was an advantage; for when the Crown at last wrested their power from them, it found that the checks imposed by feudalism or the free exercise of its authority had all been swept away.”¹⁴ In other words, the very characteristic that made the North so unique—power concentrated in the hands of a few local lords—actually worked towards its demise when the Crown asserted itself in the region.

Centralization had fleeting moments of success over the course of the Middle Ages, particularly during the reigns of Edward I (1274-1307) and Henry V (1413-1422). But from the early fourteenth century Parliament's authority increased and, as a result, so too did checks on the king's power and on his capability to govern firmly as an uncontested authority. As a result of this lack of coercive power, historian A. J. Pollard explains, “[i]t was both necessary and desirable for a king to rule with and through his greater subjects who effectively controlled the localities”; thus, Pollard continues,

¹³ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴ R. R. Reid, *The King's Council in the North* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1921 [rep. 1975]), 21.

“political harmony and civil order depended on the maintenance of a delicate balance between king and greater subject.”¹⁵ The strength of the regional magnates grew exponentially over the course of the reign of Edward III, whose government took the opposite track of his grandfather by endowing great power and prestige on provincial appointments.¹⁶ The faces of this movement are of course the Percies and, later, the Nevilles in the North. The size of their estates and the armies they could muster from these vast holdings made them significant military threats should they oppose the government and king. Reid explains these magnates’ authority:

The power of one of these lords was in fact derived less from his wealth than from the amount of patronage, administrative and judicial, that was at his disposal simply as seigneur, the lord of scores of baronies and manors; and it is no wonder that while the gentry of the North sought in the service of Lancaster, Percy, or Neville a career and a livelihood for themselves and their sons, men of rank and wealth were willing to serve them as they served the king.... so all the ablest and most ambitious men were drawn into their service and wore their badge and livery.¹⁷

¹⁵ A. J. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 48.

¹⁶ See Norman McCord and Richard Thompson, *The Northern Counties from AD 1000* (London: Longman, 1998). McCord and Thompson explain that “[d]uring the fourteenth century there was a reversal of the previous trend for the North to be absorbed into normal royal administration” (70).

¹⁷ Reid, *The King’s Council in the North*, 18-19.

Such influence was seen often to challenge the rule of the sovereign. In 1379 Richard II appointed John of Gaunt King's Lieutenant in the North to stay the power of the Percies in the North,¹⁸ and Edward IV did the very same thing for the very same reason nearly a century later, appointing his brother Richard of Gloucester, the future Richard III, as King's Lieutenant. But the northern magnates' great power also allowed them to be exceptional guardians of the northern borders against the constant threat of Scotland. Their rise to power indeed is largely owed to the realm's need for strong and effective leadership at the borders, a need that ultimately diminished the Crown's power and influence in the North for much of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The sway of the northern lords' authority may have reached its height collectively under Henry VI's tumultuous rule. Consolidation, however, recommenced with full vigor during the reign of Edward IV (1461-70, 1471-83). The result was not merely a significant loss of power by the northern magnates; rather, a strong central government curtailed the distinct regional autonomy of the North as a whole. If any formal end to the North as an unruly region might be witnessed, it is in Henry VIII's establishment of the Council of the North in 1537. Though the council began under Richard III, Henry reconfigured it as a body suppressive of northern upheaval. For

¹⁸ Rose, *Kings in the North*, 328, notes that Gaunt was "[a] Londoner with lands in the Midlands and the South (but only one barony and Dunstanburgh Castle in Northumberland), Gaunt could not grasp the peculiar Northern social-cultural features like the virtually institutionalised banditry, a booty based economy and the clientage between the old intermarried Border dynasties and the gentry."

Henry VIII, the council, in Reid's words, "solves the problem of the North at last," and it, significantly, marks the culmination of consolidated rule more broadly by the English monarch.¹⁹ It was, then, in 1537—in the wake of the Act of Supremacy and the dissolution of the monasteries that greatly impacted the staunchly Catholic North—that Henry VIII took the lands of the Percies, and subsequent franchises, including Beverly, into his direct control once and for all. The culmination of centralized monarchy and absolutist power in Henry VIII's reign has led James Simpson, among other scholars, to view this moment as the definitive shift from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. Simpson argues, "only new concentrations of political power enable such powerful redrawings of the periodic map."²⁰ Centralization did not simply shift jurisdictional maps, replace provincial elites with friends of the king, or establish London and Westminster as the nucleus of English law. Consolidation made possible the emergence of modern sovereignty in England—the absolutist king of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes—and the modern English nation state. The modern sovereign's

¹⁹ R. R. Reid, *The King's Council in the North*, 165.

²⁰ James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History, Vol. II: Reformation and Cultural Revolution 1350-1547* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1; Kathleen Davis, citing Simpson's study, further views "sixteenth-century politics (rather than fourteenth- or fifteenth-century humanism) ... as critical to medieval/early modern periodization in its predominant form." Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 17.

surfacing in England was feasible only after provincial power and regional autonomy had been seized from the North and its once-great magnates.

Resistance to this conscious consolidation of government can be seen in various fifteenth-century northern texts. Patricia Clare Ingham has noted an example in the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, a poem likely composed in the Cumberland region and whose extant manuscripts date from the middle to later fifteenth century, placing it near to the compilation of the *Gest*. In the *Awntyrs*, the Scotsman Galleroun and Arthur's champion Gawain duel over land rightfully inherited by Galleroun. Correlating the scene of their encounter with the political upheaval of the Wars of the Roses, Ingham calls Galleroun's and Gawain's combat a "useful metaphor for [outlying regions'] struggles with a London-based aristocracy deploying regional alliances and identities ("Yorkists" and "Lancastrians") in its battles over centralized power."²¹ Noting the regional determinism of this poem, she explains, "[a]s a metaphor for regional concerns, Scotland offers a means at once to resist English moves toward centralization and at the same time to deny that English centralization complicates northern loyalties at all."²² In other words, the far-northwest community of England could safely channel its frustrations of government consolidation through the figure of the Scottish knight Galleroun, fighting for what is rightfully his against the English monarch's imperial reach. Comparing the *Awntyrs* and *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawane*, Randy

²¹ Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 187.

²² *Ibid.*, 188.

Schiff similarly finds that these texts “register regional reactions to processes of nation formation sweeping away the borderlands society that had fed off the almost continuous armed conflict of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.”²³ Conflict meant money and provincial power for families like the Percies, which they used to grow their own private armies and to dictate, largely, the politics of their region. But war with Scotland also secured their significance in England’s nationalist and imperialist interests. Thus, the Anglo-Scottish wars provided balance to these magnates’ contradictory position within England. The magnates were both servants of the Crown (protectors of the realm) and, as before, “Kings in the North.”²⁴ Consolidation threatened to render this convergence of service and autonomy mute.

Dating from a period only slightly later than the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, and before *Golagros and Gawain*, *A Gest of Robyn Hode* resists centralization as well. In contrast to the knightly figures of the *Awntyrs* and *Gologras*, the *Gest*’s defiance works through an outlaw.²⁵ This shift does not distance Robin Hood, however, from the knights

²³ Randy P. Schiff, "Borderland Subversions: Anti-imperial Energies in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Gologras and Gawane*," *Speculum* 84 (2009): 613. See also Rose, *Kings in the North*, 466-70. Edward IV’s negotiations of truce and his economically-minded war-mongering put severe constraints on border warfare, notably allowing Percy and Richard of Gloucester an allowance good for only four weeks of campaigning in Scotland in 1482.

²⁴ See the introduction of the present study, 31n.

²⁵ Ralph Hanna, in his edition, *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn* (Manchester, UK, 1974), dates the poem roughly between 1400-1430. Thomas Hahn

Galleroun or Gologras as easily as one might think. We can, in fact, read the *Gest* as a text of resistance for disillusioned aristocracy in the North for whose great power centralization spelled the end.

Robin Hood is clearly chivalrous and presents himself in the *Gest* very much as a feudal lord. He maintains a small army of liveried retainers, whose loyalty the King himself will envy towards the end of the ballad. Like Gamelyn, a nobleman-turned-outlaw, Robin is “king of the outlaws,” and though Robin’s livery may seem parodic, livery is still, as Ohlgren reminds us, a privilege “reserved for the aristocracy.”²⁶ Further linking the *Gest* with these Arthurian texts, Dobson and Taylor point out that “the contents as well as the form of the early Robin Hood ballads reveal the strong influence upon them of the conventions of late medieval English romance.”²⁷ While not denying the broad social appeal of numerous Robin Hood stories, the ballads were as likely the subject of aristocratic performance. There is clear precedent for Robin Hood as a

suggests that *Gologras*, of which no manuscript exists, was written not long before the earliest extant print was made in 1508 in Edinburgh. See the introduction to *A Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI., 1995).

²⁶ Ohlgren, “Edwardus Redivivus,” 17. One might read Robin’s gifting of livery as a parody of the proliferation of this once-aristocratic symbol in the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries—when, for instance, in the *Gest* Little John gives the knight Sir Richard an exorbitant measure of green cloth, but as Ohlgren suggests, the act was still reserved by law to the aristocracy.

²⁷ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robin Hood*, 10.

character of nobles' interest. For example, Edward III staged a faux-ambush by a body of foresters all dressed in green for his prisoner King John of France as the latter made his way from Winchester to London in 1357.²⁸ More telling, in 1510, a young Henry VIII and some of his nobles infiltrated the queen's chamber dressed in green with hoods, bows, and arrows; and in 1515, King Henry and Queen Catherine were entertained at Shooter's Hill by "tall yomen, clothed all in grene with grene whodes & bowes & arroes, to the nuber of. ii. C." and led by one "which called him selfe Robyn hood."²⁹ We cannot, then, merely see the ballads of Robin Hood as fodder for town halls and taverns.

The Robin Hood ballads, as they have come down to us in written form, were probably the product of fourteenth-century minstrels, and though some critics have perceived the Robin Hood stories as the product of "yeomen minstrelsy," J. C. Holt argues that entertainers "surely sought larger audiences and better pay" than could be provided in a yeoman's household. The only audience capable of such support, for Holt, was "the crown, the aristocracy and the landed gentry ... their retainers and

²⁸ Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 193-94.

²⁹ *Hall's Chronicle, containing the history of England, during the reign of Henry the Fourth, and the succeeding monarchs, to the end of the reign of Henry the Eighth, in which are particularly described the manners and customs of those periods. Carefully collated with the editions of 1548 and 1550* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1809), 513, 582.

dependents.”³⁰ David Fowler’s history of the ballad, further, illustrates the provincial tendencies of these minstrels. Viewing the late fourteenth century London court as an “international cultural center demanding the sophistication of a Chaucer while perhaps deriding the provincial talents of the minstrel,” Fowler claims that the fate of the minstrels, consequently, “became entwined with that of the great barons of the north and west, who were at that time engaged in a power struggle with the king.”³¹ Thus, while Robin Hood was a figure for royal and noble entertainment, he could also be a figure of protest by a similarly aristocratic audience.

We might then imagine the *Gest* or some version of it being recited (not sang as Fowler emphatically argues) for a northern audience who finds in the chivalrous and cunning outlaw a figure of resistance to southern encroachment on their territory, authority, and identity. Alluding to Henry VI’s weak rule, Christine Chism has recently suggested that the early Robin Hood ballads’ “northerly affiliation evokes particularly fraught tensions between royal and local administration of the law, especially during the political decentralizations of the fifteenth century, when the north appeared to be slipping from monarchical control.”³² While I agree with her sense of tension we might

³⁰ Holt, *Robin Hood*, 110.

³¹ David C. Fowler, *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968), 8.

³² Christine Chism, "Robin Hood: Thinking Globally, Acting Locally in the Fifteenth-Century Ballads," in *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in*

also view the *Gest* as a later text emerging in its current form amidst the centralizing rule of Edward IV. I suggest, then, that the *Gest* is a text produced for northern men, particularly the northern magnates and their retainers, in defiance of this consolidation and bemoaning the region's fleeting independence.

“London-ward ... To Brynge Hym Under Fote”

Centralization is signified in the *Gest* through the role played by the distant capital. London functions more as a center for transactions of injustice than a site of appeal to good and true law. Workers of treachery in the ballad view London as a place to which they must travel in order to advance their often-illegal self-interests, particularly, to deprive the ballad's protagonists of land, life and wealth.

In the ballad's early scenes, Robin encounters the good knight Sir Richard at Lee in Barnsdale wood, and he learns that Sir Richard has had to pay off the family of a man whom his son had killed. To do so the knight took a loan from the treacherous Abbot of St. Mary's Abbey in York, for which he put up his ancestral lands as collateral, and to whom he was heading to announce his inability to pay. Robin loans the knight the money to pay back the Abbot, who had already been planning his seizure of the knight's property. Incensed at the good knight's repayment of his loan, the Abbot dispatches his celerer to “London-ward, / There to holde grete mote, / The knyghts that rode so hye on hors, / To brynge hym under fote” (1009-1012). Having failed to seize

Medieval England, ed. Candace Barrington and Emily Steiner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 37.

the knight's lands through forfeiture, the Abbot aims to seize the knight's land through treachery by a shadily negotiated legal writ in London far removed from the North and the lands in question. His plot falters when the celerer, on his way to London and passing through Barnsdale, encounters Robin Hood, who relieves the monk of the £800 he carries in his train. Later in the *Gest*, the Sheriff of Nottingham speeds to "London towne" (1287) to render what we expect is a biased account of Robin Hood's and Sir Richard's actions in Nottingham, Barnsdale, and Lancashire; in fact, the sheriff warns the King that Robin "wyll be lorde, and set you at nought, / In all the northe londe" (1295-96). Of the connections had between local law and the Crown as the government consolidated its rule, Chism argues that

the localization of law enforcement that accompanied the centralization of monarchical authority over law ... gave local officials the power legally to represent the monarch and gave the gentry and locally prominent citizens more influence within the evolving system of courts ... [with the] result [that] the already sinewy local networks that bound together the provincial elite could exercise more leverage than before.³³

The Abbot and the Sheriff certainly form a sort of Yorkish clique pursuing the land of Sir Richard in Fyttt 2. Both men are figures participating within or working directly for a centralized administration located in London. They depend on London as much or more than their local network to work treachery. Yet if centralization empowered such

³³ Ibid., 13

lesser men as a greedy abbot or a corrupt sheriff, this should not imply, as it seems to in Chism's allusion to "provincial elite," that centralization empowered the magnates. Indeed, consolidation of power to London siphoned authority from these ruling families into the hands of the Crown.

The narrative movements to London by the Abbot and Sheriff more readily signal a subversion of provincial power rather than that power's complicity in London's authoritative reach. Like the local officials signified by the Sheriff in the *Gest*, a family such as the Percies was a likely target for derision. Their great power afforded them opportunities to exploit lesser landholders at their will, and no doubt such extortion and intimidation by the Percies or men of their faction took place over the course of the century and a half they ruled the North. As part of their office as wardens of the marches the Percies were, at any given time, sheriffs or forest wardens as well—offices frequently occupied by villains in numerous Robin Hood stories. But we should temper such a negative view with the fact that the northern magnates clearly understood their precarious situation as border lords. In order to protect their own holdings, much less the kingdom itself, Percies, Cliffords, Nevilles and other ruling families needed a loyal following of men to aid their cause. As Norman McCord and Richard Thompson point out, "most magnates recognized that this entailed caution in exploitation of estates, for income was often subordinated to 'good lordship' to obtain a loyal following in dangerous times."³⁴ In the later fifteenth century, for example, peasant farmers and

³⁴ McCord and Thompson, *The Northern Counties*, 78.

other prospectors illegally encroached upon and ate away at forest lands with new farm settlements. Rather than punishing the offenders or extorting them, the Percies more often legitimated the practice by granting tenancies at will which “at least brought income, and could multiply [their] dependents and [their] supply of fighting men in dangerous times.”³⁵ For the men of northern England, the border magnates were protectors of the realm but more importantly protectors of the North. Therefore, a network between local law officials and London would be seen to undermine the power of provincial elite like the Percies.

For the protagonists of the *Gest*, London is not a place from which good law emerges. Instead, true justice is carried in the person of the King wherever he goes. With his castle besieged by the Sheriff of Nottingham, Sir Richard requests in turn that the sheriff terminate his siege “Tyll ye wyt oure kynges wille, / What he wyll say to the” (1283-84). Later, Robin tells Sir Richard, whom he has just freed from Nottingham jail, that “Though shalt with me to grene wode, / Without ony leasyng, / Tyll that I have gete us grace / Of Edward, our comly kyng” (1409-12). Robin and Richard are content to wait for this “grace” to come from the King. What follows over the course of the “fourteenyght” before the King’s journey to Nottingham is a brief period of unusual and eerie calm. The poet tells us that everyone returns to their normal stations: The sheriff “went hym on his way, / And Robyn Hode to grene wode, / And Lyel John ... / dyd hym streyght to Robyn Hode” (1306-1311) and Sir Richard goes “hauling by the

³⁵ Ibid., 120.

ryver-syde” (1323). Though it is short-lived this peace testifies to these subjects’ intense belief in the power and justice of the sovereign.

If Robin Hood and Sir Richard expect requital for the Sheriff’s treachery, however, King Edward does not respond in the way they might have hoped. The King declares Sir Richard’s lands forfeit to any man that might kill him. His act is both justified—Sir Richard indeed has harbored an outlaw by taking in Robin Hood and his men—and, at the same time, as self-interested as those suits by the Abbot and the Sheriff. Much as the Arthur of the *Awntyrs*, King Edward’s actions suggest imperialist intention. He seizes the lands of a chivalrous knight who, like Galleroun, inherited his land from ancestors “An hundred wynter here before” (187) in order to give them over to one who will perform the blood work of imperialism. Edward wants to replace Sir Richard with a minion on whom he can more readily call upon from his seat in London.

The Sovereign and the Outlaw

Unlike its contemporary *Awntyrs off Arthure* or *Gologras, A Gest of Robyn Hode* figures animosity towards monarchical centralization directly. Rather than channeling hostility through the figure of a Scottish other, the northerner Robin Hood attacks figures of local administration—representatives of the King’s law—directly. Knight is correct to say of the Robin Hood stories that “the concept central to the whole myth ... appears to be resistance to authority,”³⁶ and Peter Stallybrass likewise sees Robin Hood “legitimat[ing] popular justice against the official ideological and legal apparatus which

³⁶ Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, 15.

claims to have a monopoly of justice.”³⁷ What better way indeed for northerners to protest the loss of legal authority and the rule of their own territory than by attacking the new figures of royal jurisdiction through a chivalrous, cunning, pious, and revered “outlaw” such as Robin Hood, seen here as a figure who dispenses true and natural law? But Robin Hood’s anti-authoritarian dynamic is more complex than such arguments frame him, for he always reveres the sovereign. Though he rejects the King’s court towards the *Gest*’s end, he will always “love no man in all the worlde / So well as I do my kynge” (1541-42). As Gray comments, “The ideal ‘image’ is an outlaw regarded as an agent of justice or a restorer of morality, opposed to the corruption of local officials (subordinate figures) rather than to the king himself.”³⁸ Through the northern outlaw, who is like a king, and his relationship with England’s king, *A Gest of Robyn Hode* recalls the intimacies between the sovereign, his regional magnates—king-like in themselves—as it ultimately laments the loss of northern autonomy in the inevitable consolidation of sovereign power and the sovereign absolute.³⁹

³⁷ Peter Stallybrass, “‘Drunk with the Cup of Liberty’: Robin Hood, the Carnavalesque and the Rhetoric of Violence in Early Modern England,” in Knight, *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 298.

³⁸ Douglas Gray, “The Robin Hood Ballads,” in Knight, *Robin Hood: And Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 35.

³⁹ I will not go so far as to suggest that the audience for *A Gest of Robyn Hode* is that of Percy sympathizers, though Thomas Ohlgren has made a somewhat similar argument for the Yorkists in his recent book-length study of the early ballads: “York readers likely responded favorably to the Yorkshire setting of the opening fyttes of the poem as

Centralization provokes not just a question of regional governance but a crisis of sovereignty. The later fifteenth-century period of government consolidation in England subtly plays out debates of sovereign power that had ranged over the course of the Middle Ages: particularly, whether a monarch's power was ceded to him by the people or whether he was an absolute ruler divined by God and possessed of absolute authority. As I will suggest, the *Gest* does not just explore these questions through the King's proactive role in the later episodes; rather, in these episodes, the *Gest* juxtaposes a centralized ruler with his most uncannily similar subject: the outlaw, who like the King exists both inside and outside of law. Nearly the final third of the ballad focuses on the King, and his emergence in the narrative is in no way subtle. Though we have no reference to the "king" or the "kynges" possessions, his enemies or his "wille" until line 1275, from here, variations of "king" appear sixty-one times in the ballad's final 549 lines. This sudden interest in the sovereign does not stem simply from the ballad's use, in Fytts 7 and 8, of the "King and Subject" motif—a story in which the King-in-disguise encounters one of his lesser subjects who frequently treats the sovereign with indignation before the King reveals himself. It is clear that the *Gest* alludes to this popular storyline, but the ballad inversely turns the humorous trope of "King and Subject" into an encounter of high seriousness. The King is figuratively and literally

well as to the pro-Yorkists political ideology and allusions to the woolen cloth industry. London readers ... would have recognized the numerous references to mercantile policies and practices embedded in the poem as well as the favorable depiction of the Yorkist king, Edward IV." Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 134.

confronted not with a crass laborer or a craftsmen but a second “king” worthy of equal if not greater admiration. When faced with Robin Hood’s army of foresters in the seventh fytt of the *Gest*, King Edward will reply, “His men are more at his byddyng / Then my men be at myn” (1563-64). These later episodes of the *Gest* resonate with debates on the peculiarities of sovereignty that occupied legists, clerics, philosophers, and politicians for much of the Middle Ages.

The question of sovereignty in the Middle Ages grew out of the problematic juxtaposition of the Pope and Holy Roman Emperor as supreme powers. The fifth-century pope Gelasius I famously defines the roles of the Pope and Emperor as “two swords” consecrated by God and governing the spiritual and temporal realms separately yet in harmony with one another. But Gelasius also claims that the spiritual sword maintains a higher dignity. His views proceeded to ignite a controversy that lasted nearly 1000 years. Also problematizing the situation was the segmentation of territories both within and beyond the Holy Roman Empire. If previous debates about sovereignty hinged on the divine authority of either the Pope or the Holy Roman Emperor or both, from the twelfth century, the monarchs of the lesser territories and states, including England, found greater and greater autonomy. Hoping to undermine the territorial power of the Holy Roman Emperor, the popes, particularly, Innocent III—with some irony—endowed upon the regional monarchies unrivaled authority, and almost immediately a large body of legists and other political thinkers began working to check these monarch’s reach.

This resistance to growing sovereign power led to renewed interest in Roman law. In his incomplete *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae* (“The Laws and Customs of England”), thirteenth-century English jurist Henry Bracton recalls the Roman *lex regia*. Through this ancient legal precedent Roman citizens ceded absolute power to the ruler theoretically both to endow the king with legal superiority and at the same time to keep him under the law with the understanding that his power originates in the people. A century before Bracton, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II had appealed to ancient Roman law to bolster his largely absolutist rule. Appealing to these same Roman laws, Bracton, as Ernst Kantorowicz illustrates,

inserted a qualification of the maxim “Quod principi placuit” by qualifying the very word placuit, “please.” Unlike Frederick II, Bracton ... deduced from the word placuit not an uncontrolled and God-inspired rule of the Prince, but a council-controlled and council-inspired, almost impersonal or supra-personal, rule of the king. What “pleased the Prince” was Law; but what pleased him had, first of all, to please the council.⁴⁰

Bracton’s concept of the council-pleasing monarch was indicative of a widening philosophical gap between thinkers on sovereignty. The assertion of a more absolute power by rulers and the corresponding resistance by legists, political philosophers, and regional magnates, F. H. Hinsley points out, “[initiated] in the more developed societies

⁴⁰ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 151.

a rapid development of constitutional procedures and ideas ... organization of Parliaments and Estates in the interest of the magnates who were in fact increasing their powers.”⁴¹ Bracton’s sovereign was still powerful, still in most cases above the law, but he was bound by divine or natural law, the principles of morality implicit in rational thought and action and, for many legists, handed down from God and discernible through reason. Many of these thinkers saw natural law as the basis for positive law, which was then created and instituted by a political body. As Kantorowicz reasons, the sovereign “was bound to the Natural Law not merely in its transcendental and metalegal abstraction, but also in its concrete temporal manifestations which included the rights of clergy, magnates, and people—a very important point in an England which relied predominantly on unwritten laws and customs.”⁴² The complex figure of the king as both within and without the law is carried over into the Thomist movement of the later thirteenth century and to the Ockhamist/nominalist debate of the fourteenth century.

For Thomas Aquinas, natural law came from God. Reading Aristotle’s *Politics*, Aquinas saw the political community as a natural outgrowth of God’s people. God created law and, in so doing, committed himself to its integrity. Through reason we may, then, understand God and law, and we may act on our understanding. Aquinas notably denied that Christendom needed a ruler like the pope or the emperor. For Aquinas, natural law was, as Jean Elshtain explains, “unalterably fixed by God, the

⁴¹ F. H. Hinsley, *Sovereignty*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 91-2.

⁴² Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 148-49.

Bible was to be preferred to the pope as the authority even in religion, and the kingdom was a natural human community set up by God for the maintenance of order.”⁴³ This, of course, stems from Aquinas’ chief tenet: that we can know God and our place in time through reason. But contradictions in the Thomist view of sovereignty precipitated the absolutist views that followed—notably those of nominalists opposed to the realism of Aquinas and his adherents. Thomistic emphasis on the accessibility of God, on his closeness to man through the humanity of the Son, worked against belief in God’s omnipotence and his unquestioned and unchallengeable rule in the universe. As Elshtain equates, “if God is so accessible to us, what happens to God’s omnipotence, his awesome power that stuns us into worshipful silence?”⁴⁴ The eleventh-century monk Peter Damian, in his *de Divina Omnipotentia*, had argued, notably, for God’s absolute power and arbitrary will, and his argument reemerges in the early fourteenth century thought of William of Ockham.

Like his contemporaries, Dante and Marsilius of Padua, the Oxford theologian Ockham was an anti-papalist holding that Christendom was not a political community to be ruled (by the pope). But this was merely part of his stripping away the sense that God created man for any specific reason other than his arbitrary will. For the nominalist Ockham, God acted on his own will and his reasoning was not always something attainable or comprehensible, as the Thomists claimed. The result is a more distant God.

⁴³ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2008), 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

Further, as Elshtain explains, such a view “diminished the intelligibility of the world and threw medieval thought and practice into a whirlwind of controversy from which it never recovered.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in all these debates, the thirteenth-century legists’ sense of the Roman *lex regia*—the choice of the people to endow the ruler with absolute power—remained, and controversy about who possessed the will to rule on earth negotiated between the sovereign and his subjects.

These debates on sovereign power and on the precedence of natural law over positive law haunt the later episodes of *A Gest of Robyn Hode*. In the seventh fytt of the *Gest*, King Edward’s charter, which offers Sir Richard’s lands in exchange for his life, does not have the effect the King intended. A “fayre olde knyght, / That was treue in his fay” (1445-46) informs the King that “There is no man in this countre / May have the knyghtes londres, / Whyle Robyn Hode may ryde or gone” (1449-51) and warns Edward that any man brave enough to pursue the King’s warrant “shall lese his hede” (1453) at Robin’s hands. Despite his physical absence, Robin Hood has redrawn the King’s charter into a death warrant for the man who carries it out. The effect of Robin Hood’s sheer presence in the North, here, suggests that he has already accomplished what the Sheriff prophesied to the King: “He wyll be lorde, and set you at nought, / in all the northe londe” (1295-96). The King’s clear consternation, indeed, is with Robin Hood himself rather than Sir Richard. Though he asks the local men “After Robyn Hode, / And after that gentyll knyght” (1418), he, tellingly, swears only that he “wolde I had

⁴⁵ Ibid., 35.

Robyn Hode” (1435). But Edward does not offer any money for the head of Robin Hood, nor does he draw up any charter declaring the property of the outlaw fair game. The King acts on Sir Richard because Robin Hood has no possessions, no quantifiable, fiscal presence in records, charters, or roll books. He, of course, has accumulated great wealth in the greenwood, but no one knows (perhaps not even Robin) how much, and, most importantly, it is not his own. He is an outlaw and, consequently, without legal property or rights; as Maurice Keen says, “he was civilly dead (*civiliter mortus*).”⁴⁶

As an outlaw Robin Hood is literally banned from society; he becomes like a wolfman, taking on the “wolf’s head,” a designation coming down from the laws of Edward the Confessor. For example, in the late fourteenth century *Tale of Gamelyn*, which is often associated with the early Robin Hood ballads, the protagonist and newly crowned “king of outlaws” (691) is told that his brother the sheriff “hath endited the and wolfesheed doth the crye” (706). As Keen explains of the outlaw given this peculiar designation, “he had no more rights than a hunted beast ... the price on his head was originally that upon a wolf.”⁴⁷ The outlaw could be killed with impunity; and his death would not be considered a crime, a homicide. Giorgio Agmben compares the medieval outlaw with the ancient Roman legal figure *Homo Sacer* (sacred man), also a social outcast who could not be sacrificed and whose own murder did not constitute a legal homicide. In drawing a distinction between political life and what he calls the “bare

⁴⁶ Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1987), 9-10.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

life” of *Homo Sacer* and the outlaw, Agamben claims, “it is only political life that is truly lived in language, that can truly speak. Bare life is mute, undifferentiated, and stripped of both the generality and the specificity that language makes possible.”⁴⁸ But it seems that if the outlaw in his bare existence cannot speak, neither can one speak of him; he is not merely without language but removed from it as well, much as he is removed from law. What is most revealing about the King’s channeling his anger at Robin Hood onto the figure of Sir Richard is that the King himself cannot speak of Robin Hood as a subject to be dealt with through legal means.

Noting the medieval outlaw and the designation of the wolf’s head, Agamben explains, “The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is ... a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, physis and nomos, exclusion and inclusion ... the werewolf, who is precisely neither man nor beast, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.”⁴⁹ Scottish Chronicler Walter Bower illustrates this bifurcated view of the medieval outlaw in his mid-fifteenth-century continuation of John of Fordun’s *Scottichronicon*. Bower alludes to Robin and Little John as “famous murderers ... whom the foolish populace are so inordinately fond of celebrating,” yet he narrates a heroic episode similar to that found in the earliest existing ballad, *Robin Hood and the Monk*. In Bower, we find Robin hearing mass in a secluded chantry when

⁴⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and the Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 105.

he is told that the Sheriff has discovered his presence. Robin refuses to leave and consequently confronts and defeats the Sheriff's men. The ransom and spoils he collects from his enemies he gives to the church, and Bower closes the episode with a didactic line: "God harkens to him who hears Mass frequently."⁵⁰ This Janus-like, two-faced, Robin testifies to the paradox of the outlaw. He is treacherous ("murderers") and admirable (for his piety), charming and dangerous, salvific and fatal.

Robin Hood's duplicitous character is one of the more notable aspects of the early ballads. He can be wittily captivating when he beguiles the Sheriff of Nottingham or stifles the schemes of the Abbot of St. Mary's, York through his generous loan to Sir Richard to save the knight's land. In *Robin Hood and the Potter* Robin elicits a laugh from the sheriff's wife ("sche toke op a lowde lawhyng" [302]) at her husband's expense after Robin has tricked him. Similarly, in the opening lines of the *Gest*, like the Arthur of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Robin refuses to dine until he is entertained by "som bolde baron, / Or som unkouth gest" (23-24). But this charm is set against the violent nature of the outlaw's work. Rescuing Sir Richard from jail, Robin buries an arrow in the Sheriff's chest and then cuts off his head. And most critics cringe when, in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Little John decapitates a scurrilous monk in Barnsdale wood and Much pulls the monk's helpless "litull page" (205)—a child—off his horse and does the same simply "For ferd lest he wolde tell" (206).

⁵⁰ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 26, quote the translation of the Latin text by A.I. Jones, which appears in Francis Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. 5 vols. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin and Co., 1882-98), 3:41.

The outlaw's animality and sophistication make him a liminal figure. When the sovereign bans the outlaw—when it is declared that he may be killed without homicide—the act does not necessarily remove him from society; rather, he becomes complexly wound up within and beyond the law. Though the outlaw is “outside” the law, the declaration of his status and the absence of homicide in his death are nevertheless dictated by the law. As Agamben suggests, the outlaw maintains a spectral presence inside and outside of the *polis* (the political realm). In much the same way, Robin haunts the town of Nottingham and manifests/vanishes within the greenwood. The paradox of the outlaw—both within and without law—coincides with questions of the sovereign, who is both bound to the law and, by that very same law, able to declare the “state of exception.”

The complexity of Robin's character is exemplified in his confrontation with the Sheriff of Nottingham. Though in his aggression towards the Sheriff, Robin acts as an outlaw should (opposing legal authority), he also acts as a harbinger of natural law ridding the town of a corrupt official. When Robin confronts the Sheriff in the streets of Nottingham, he claims to be eager to hear “some tidings of our king” (1379). But he in fact seems methodically to bring these tidings to the Sheriff, who has corrupted the King's law. Robin Hood performs as though he were the King's own executioner and in retribution for the Sheriff's numerous offenses. Throughout the ballad the Sheriff has committed various immoral and illegal acts that warrant justice. He is present when Sir Richard confronts the Abbot of St Mary's, York in the second fytt, offering only a

“Nay, for God” (428) as Sir Richard solicits his friendship. The scene makes clear that a local justice is in his own terms “holde with the abbot / Both with cloth and fee” (425-26). In other words, the Abbot has bought off this representative of the King’s Law, has put the official at his call and in his pocket. In doing so, the Abbot has, as Chism points out, “usurped a power reserved to the king alone,” and made the Sheriff quietly complicit in the crime.⁵¹ Further, ignoring what the King declared (that he would take Robin Hood and the knight himself), and ignoring his own oath to Sir Richard that he would cease his pursuit “Tyll ye wyt oure kynges wille” (1283), the Sheriff ambushes the knight and takes him to Nottingham jail. This is the second oath broken by the Sheriff. Little John’s trickery in the third fytt lures the Sheriff to Robin Hood in the greenwood. Outmatched and outmanned, the Sheriff promises to uphold Robin’s request that he “never awayte me scathe, / By water ne by lande” (807-8). Yet just a few lines later, following the shooting contest at Nottingham (won by Robin), the Sheriff orders his men to seize the outlaw. Thus, in pursuing Robin and seizing Sir Richard the Sheriff has ignored the oaths he swore to each man and, at the same time, he has impatiently foregone the King’s own declaration to bring justice to the outlaws himself. For all of these actions, the Sheriff suffers under Robin’s bow and sword. The image of the head of Nottingham law, the Sheriff, lying headless in the city streets bemoans the absence of justice in the region and also signals the exchange of legal authority about to happen when the King himself arrives.

⁵¹ Chism, “Robin Hood: Thinking Globally,” 20.

In his dishonesty, the Sheriff evokes a failed positive law, corrupted and self-interested. Worse, in speeding to the King to condemn Sir Richard and Robin Hood, the Sheriff violates a foundational premise of natural law: *audi et alterum partem* (the right of both sides to make their case), the principle of fair hearing that descends from Roman law and grounds natural law in the Middle Ages.⁵² In violent retribution for the Sheriff's offenses, then, Robin emerges from the forest, dressed in green, as an embodied and corrective natural law to destroy the Sheriff. One might ask how an outlaw can signify any form of law at all, but in medieval legal theory, natural law always precedes and supersedes positive law, from which the outlaw is cast. Natural law, then, stands outside of positive law just as the outlaw himself.

Robin Hood's liminal status as outlaw informs his relationship to the King. Though it is the foundation on which positive law stands, natural law also dictates the King's ability to go beyond the law altogether. Noted political theologian Carl Schmitt once declared, "The sovereign is he who decides on the exception."⁵³ But the notion of the sovereign exception or the "state of exception" comes from the sixth-century Justinian Code, which medieval legists in their zeal for Roman law appropriated for

⁵² See Daan Asser, "'Audi et alteram partem': A Limit to Judicial Activity," *The Roman Law Tradition*, ed. A. D. E. Lewis and David J. Ibbetson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 209-23.

⁵³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, ed. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1.

debates on sovereignty in the early Middle Ages. Michael Wilks explains the place of the exception for these medieval thinkers:

There will, nevertheless, always remain cases which the existing law does not cover, or cases of emergency or special circumstances in which it would be detrimental to the common good, to the status republicae, to enforce the law as it stands. In these cases equity (which may be equated with iustitia or natural law) demands that the law should be ignored: it has temporarily ceased to conform to the standards of ultimate rightness which give it validity and force. A 'case of necessity' thus becomes seen as an occasion when natural-divine law, which transcends positive law, is directly involved. Consequently it is a sacred duty for the ruler as animate divine natural law to override the provisions of the common law of the community.⁵⁴

Wilks' account alludes to the interconnectedness of natural law and the sovereign exception. It is in the cause of natural or divine law, whose rightness can never be questioned, that the King declares himself beyond positive law. Again, natural law precedes the existence of positive law. It is both beyond positive law and, at the same time, its very foundation. We can see, then, how the idea of natural law and the figures of the sovereign and the outlaw correspond. The king's ability to declare someone

⁵⁴ Michael Wilks, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Late Middle Ages: The Papal Monarchy with Augustinus Triumphus and the Publicists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 217.

outside of the law, such as Robin or Sir Richard, affirms his position as originator of positive law while also calling to mind his capacity to declare himself beyond the law, a declaration allowed for by natural law. The King's authority to declare the state of exception, the state wherein he acts beyond the law, testifies to his boundless authority, and it is this power that legists labor to counteract in the Middle Ages when they contend that even the king must adhere to natural law. The outlaw is, then, implicated in defining actions of sovereign power. Both the King and the outlaw prove exceptions to positive law. Robin Hood, as an outlaw existing outside of the law and, at the same time, embodying natural law, parallels the figure of the King.

Robin's confrontation with figures of positive law (the Sheriff) or with the *polis* itself (Nottingham, London) foreground the dichotomy between nature and politics, between natural law and positive law, in the ballad. Robin Hood offers a kind of retributive justice and economic redistribution based on what he judges to be inherently right and good no matter what the prescribed law of the Sheriff and the towns claims, just as he asks his men to pick out a guest on the road by Barnsdale Forrest that "wol be a good felawe" (56). Even in the time of Bracton, such questions of the King's power—where and how the sovereign corresponded to natural law—were already under debate. If the kingdom's subjects, as Hinsley argues,

sought security against the Crown by grounding their rights—and especially those in property and from the contract of government—in natural law, which placed them above the reach of positive law, of

statue, of the state [then] [t]he Crown supplemented its growing insistence that the rights and the powers acquired by parliaments were privileges arising from positive law, conceded by the state and freely revocable by the ruler, with an equally marked insistence that kings were God's agents who could not alienate their powers.⁵⁵

Centralization in late-medieval England provided the ever-strengthening Crown fuel for its argument for the very fact that its capture of provincial estates, offices and titles headed off future resistance (including that of the provincial elite). This is not merely an assertion of sovereign power but a redefinition of natural law. No longer the ultimate check of a king's power, natural law becomes the will of the divinely sanctioned sovereign. This is symptomatic of a shift in terms of sovereignty in Western Europe.

In all their emphasis on rational law and the sovereign's relationship to his subjects, the Thomists actually allowed for the sovereign exception. Wilks explains that for Aquinas "[t]he exceptional event in which human [or positive] law fails to conform to natural law becomes a period of emergency, a state of necessity in which all law ceases [which] provides the justification for the ruler to act absolutely in certain cases."⁵⁶ Here, natural law is both the foundation on which positive law is built and a failsafe when positive law proves inadequate. For the nominalists, however, "natural law" corresponds to the King's absolute authority. Elshtain comments, "When Ockham

⁵⁵ Hinsley, *Sovereignty*, 94.

⁵⁶ Wilks, *The Problem of Sovereignty*, 212-13.

appeals to nature and natural law, he means a law imposed on human beings and the universe by divine fiat—an outside coercive and impositional command: the primacy of will over reason.”⁵⁷ This redefinition of natural law will later bear on new assertions of sovereign rule in the following centuries, in Bodin and Hobbes, but the change is evident in the later fytts of the *Gest*. As I will discuss below, in the aftermath of Robin Hood’s encounter with the King in the forest, we see a shift that has taken place, a shift in which the outlaw ceases to be a figurative check against corrupt law and even sovereign authority and becomes fully immersed within the sovereign political machine. Agamben’s explanation of what he calls the “Hobbesian mythologeme of the state of nature” emphasizes that the “natural” is for Hobbes not a precursor to the city but a vital component of it. He continues,

from the point of view of sovereignty only bare life is authentically political. This is why in Hobbes, the foundation of sovereign power is to be sought not in the subjects’ free renunciation of their natural right but in the sovereign’s preservation of his natural right to do anything to anyone, which now appears as the right to punish.⁵⁸

Agamben’s view of the sovereign exercise of natural right testifies to that designation of natural law against which the *Gest* struggles. Government centralization—and with it the consolidation of power and autonomy from the northern provinces to the Crown—

⁵⁷ Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self*, 40.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

displaces the sovereign who is governed by natural law for the absolute sovereign whose will *is* law.

What is at stake, then, in the final episodes of the *Gest* is the regional effect of this redefinition of natural law as the will of the sovereign, wherein the outlaw is no longer an entity beyond the law's reach but one merely awaiting the retributive hand of the sovereign. The ballad ultimately juxtaposes Robin Hood, as a figure of Thomistic natural law, against a centralized and centralizing monarch who is tied to London and who fears that the outlaw will, as the sheriff once claimed, "set his power at nought in the north londe." The King's coming from London reminds us of the center/periphery model under which a centralized monarchy operated, and King Edward's declaration that he will repay a "dutiful" knight with Sir Richard's lands mimics the replacement of provincials with the King's favorites in the North. But in the scenes that follow, the King comes face to face with Robin Hood the outlaw, and the remarkable intimacy of their meeting seems intentionally set against the geographic and ideological distance between Barnsdale and London highlighted previously.

The Greenwood as a "Zone of Indistinction"

The greenwood serves the outlaw as both a place of operations and a sanctuary. Unsuspecting knights, monks, and abbots gambol into the forest where they encounter either a playful or violent outlaw, and Robin and his men retreat back to the dense woods to escape the pursuits of the Sheriff. The fact that Barnsdale itself was never a royal forest and that the Sheriff of Nottingham, in reality, had no business trying to

enforce law there only make its inclusion in the story more interesting.⁵⁹ Gray argues, “A distinctive feature of the Robin Hood poems is the mysterious separateness of the outlaw realm.”⁶⁰ He refers here to several aspects of the medieval forest: its distance from town, its mythic qualities—the stuff of medieval folklore, the Green Man or Robin Goodfellow—and the way it juxtaposes wild nature and civilized man. Speaking of the sovereign ban, the act by which one becomes “outlaw,” Steve DeCaroli claims, “A necessary condition for the possibility of banishment is boundary—real or virtual, terrestrial or divine—outside of which one may be abandoned.”⁶¹ The greenwood of the *Gest* is just such a terrestrial boundary. Rather than representing the domain of the outlaw as a space of resistance and non-law set against the politicized spaces of Nottingham and London, the *Gest* figures Barnsdale Wood as an imaginative threshold wherein nature and politics intersect, where wildness and civility come together, and where natural law and positive law harmonize. Robin Hood and his men are outlaws (and Edward is king) only outside of the forest. Within it their identities muddy—both are sovereigns; both outlaws—while unspoken threats, acknowledged clemency, and playful reciprocity conflate in the moment of their encounter in the seventh and eighth fyfts.

⁵⁹ See Holt’s discussion of the physical setting of the stories. Holt, *Robin Hood*, 86-88.

⁶⁰ Gray, “The Robin Hood Ballads,” 35.

⁶¹ Steve DeCaroli, “Boundary Stones: Giorgio Agamben and the Field of Sovereignty,” in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steve DeCaroli (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 47.

The forest becomes a liminal space wherein the King, briefly divorced of absolute power, is entertained not simply by an outlaw, but a great northern lord (the king of the outlaws) and his retainers, who—though they might resist the monarch because of their own great power—nevertheless defer to their sovereign in worshipful respect and service. When he enters the greenwood, Edward, who has to this point been spiteful and vengeful, calls to mind older ideas of kingship: the sovereign governed by natural law, the King of the *lex regia* who depends for his power on his subjects' will. The King and Robin, in this brief scene, do not stand in opposition to one another but rather in accord. Though this encounter ultimately anticipates the grave end of Robin's power in the North, it first recalls the balance born of northern power within national interests, of sovereign authority within natural law.

King Edward's meeting with Robin has analogues in the "King and Subject" stories circulating in the same period. In these tales, the King, usually in some sort of plain disguise, encounters a low ranking subject. This subject, not knowing that he speaks with the King, typically offends with his rude manners, his quick temper, or by breaking the King's law in his presence. The tramp is later reconciled to the king, after some embarrassment, and often rewarded for his pains. "King and Subject" texts have direct textual connections to the earliest Robin Hood ballads. The lone text of the "King and Subject" poem *King Edward and the Shepherd* is included with the only text of *Robin Hood and the Monk* in MS Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 5.48 (c. 1450). *Robin Hood and the Potter* exists solely in MS Cambridge University Library MS Ee

4.35, another miscellany, which also contains a second “King and Subject” text, *The King and the Barker*. Ohlgren notes the significance of Robin Hood ballads included in these compilations, whose other texts “may have offered source-texts for the *Geste*-poet to adapt.”⁶² Yet, despite the seemingly obvious parallels that critics are quick to point out, the encounter between the King and Robin Hood in the *Gest* does not proceed in the same manner as meetings between the King and commoners in these humorous poems.

In “King Edward and the Shepherd,” Edward III, in disguise as a merchant fittingly named “Joly Robyn,” happens upon a shepherd called Adam.⁶³ The shepherd complains that “I hade catell; now I have I non; / They take my bestis and don þaim slone, / And payen but a stik of tre” (34-36). Adam brags about his great skill with a sling, and, as they walk through the woods, the King encourages Adam to shoot at some rabbits he has spotted along their path. Fearing that the “Wode has erys” (268) and worried about the “3ong men thre” (271) who serve the chief forester, Adam staunchly refuses the illegal act with much protest: “Hit is all þe Kyngus waren; / Ther is nouþer kny3t ne sqqayne / þat dar do sich a ded” (229-31). But when they arrive at Adam’s modest dwelling, the dutiful shepherd produces a feast literally fit for a king, a meal that includes illegally poached rabbits and venison that the shepherd proudly claims to kill

⁶² Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 149.

⁶³ Quotations of “King Edward and the Shepherd” are taken from “King Edward and the Shepherd,” in *Middle English Metrical Romances*, ed. Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 949-985.

with his “slyng for the nones / þat is made for gret stonys” (425-26). The two men and Adam’s wife feast and play a drinking game, after which Adam displays further riches and skill with his sling. Upon leaving, Edward tells Adam to come to court, where the King claims to reside as a “marchande of gret powere” (575), and to bring his tally-stick, a device that lists the government’s debts to Adam for his livestock. If Adam comes in earnest in his “russet clothyng ... / In kyrtil and in curtebye” (588-89), the King has all his men at court in on the joke. The matter is “þaire gammen” (609) and the King swears, “3e shall have gode bourd, in certayne” (612). The King even wagers on the shepherd’s poor manners: “þer is no lordre þat is so gode, / þou3 he avayle to hym his hode, / þat he wil do of his” (626-28). Adam is forced to dine with the nobles who, given his rude manners and shabby clothing, “alle þat hym aboute stode” (875) and think him “wode, / And low3 to hethyng” (876-7). They “lowgen alle / When any cuppe 3ede amys” (999-1000) until the King finally informs Adam of his true identity, upon which Adam “On knees he fel downe lawe” (1084) and begs for mercy. The poem ends here, incomplete, but we might imagine, as in other “King and Subject” texts, that Edward rewards Adam with some financial prize or some menial position in government.

Parallels between “King Edward and the Shepherd” and the *Gest*’s seventh fytt are apparent at first. Much as King Edward plays a successful merchant for the shepherd Adam, Edward comes to Barnsdale in disguise “Ryght as he were abbot-lyke” (1487), and he is met quickly by Robin and his men. Of the lavish feast Robin offers the

faux-abbot, we are told that Robin Hood and his men “served our kynge with al theyr myght” (1567):

Anone before our kynge was set
The fatte venyson,
The good whyte brede, the good rede wyne,
And therto the fyne ale and browne. (1569-72)

As in “King Edward and the Shepherd,” Robin Hood and his guest dine on the King’s deer illegally taken from the forest. In both texts, the dinner scene is a wonderfully liminal moment, wherein the law bound in the King and the non-law signified in Adam or Robin Hood blur into indistinction. The King is some sort of quasi-outlaw here, enjoying the spoils of poaching, but we might just as easily see Adam and Robin as the King’s lawful servants. The very fact that the King eats his own deer makes their poaching suddenly complicit.

Similarities grow sparse from this point, however. In contrast to the circumstances of the feast in the *Gest*, the context under which the shepherd and Edward dine in the wood is one of defiance. Adam’s first utterance to Edward, upon their meeting, is a complaint: “I am so pyllled with þe Kyng / þat I most fle fro my wonyng” (31-32). In the *Gest*, the faux-abbot elicits Robin’s dinner invitation by displaying the King’s seal, the “brode targe” (1537), at which sight Robin quickly “set hym on his kne” (1540) and proclaims, “I love no man in all the worlde / So well as I do my kynge” (1541-42). If Adam’s motives for feeding King Edward are less

honorable— because Edward claims he can help Adam receive what is owed him by the government and because Adam relishes the opportunity to brag about the numerous ways he profits against the King’s will—Robin in contrast invites the disguised Edward to dinner “For the love of my kynge” (1547).

Robin’s overt reverence for sovereign insignia actually heightens the tension of the following lines. Robin declares to Edward, “Now shalte thou se what lyfe we lede, / Or thou hens wende; / Than thou may enfourme our kynge” (1577-9). He of course refers to the fun and games of the greenwood, but when his men all jump up and draw their bows, the King “wende to have be shente” (1584). Edward’s abject fear in this brief moment marks the *Gest*’s most significant departure from the “King and Subject” motif. In those comedies of peasant fallacies, the King never fears for his safety, never lowers himself to implied victimhood. In the threshold space of the greenwood, however, both the King and Robin are at risk; one imperils the other by his very presence. Agamben explains the paradox of the sovereign ban of the outlaw:

it is possible to understand the semantic ambiguity ... in which “banned” in Romance languages originally meant both “at the mercy of” and “out of free will, freely,” both “excluded” and “open to all, free.” The ban is the force of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that ties together two poles of the sovereign exception: bare life and power.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 110-11.

In the greenwood both Robin and the King are freed of law, and yet each represents the most serious threat to the other's identity. Despite his protestation that he always loves the king, Robin's outlawry has undercut the King's authority. Though we do not know it yet, Edward's pardon and the subsequent re-appropriation of Robin as a lawful servant, further, will shatter Robin's own power and authority in the North. At this moment in the ballad, each figure is at the mercy of the other: Robin craves pardon from the King because only the King may absolve him; Edward solicits mercy from Robin because, far from his armies and his castles, he is exposed as a "mere" man in the greenwood. Yet, even this tension evokes a remarkable balance of power that proves profitable in due course for everyone.

In the contest of pluck and buffet that follows between Robin, his men, and the King, we glimpse the fairness and humility inherent in the natural state of the greenwood. According to this game, the loser loses his "takyll," his weapon and, figuratively, his power. Even more, the loser must then stand for a blow at the hands of the more-skilled victor. This passage evokes the scene of a similar contest in *Robin Hood and the Monk*. Robin and Little John engage in a shooting contest, but Robin is beaten badly. He refuses to acknowledge John's victory or his prize (five schillings), and he goes so far as to strike John for his perceived insubordination ("smote hym with his hande" [56]). Robin's tyranny as outlaw king in this awkward moment is nevertheless repaid with dutiful service as Little John, ignoring Robin's offense, rescues the outlaw from the Sheriff later in the ballad. In contrast, the games of the *Gest* exhibit

no such antagonism. The king of the forest, Robin Hood, loses this game of skill and humbly submits to the confiscation of his weapon, which he cedes to the disguised King—"I delyver the myn arowe" (1619)—who Robin then asks to deliver a buffet. The King delivers a forceful blow knocking Robin to the ground, the sheer force of which gives the King away. We are told, "Thus our kynge and Robyn Hod / Togeder gan they mete" (1635-36). Robin's reaction to the King's presence suggests a significant if mysterious connection between the two. "Robyn behelde our comly kynge / Wystly in the face" (1637-38), but we wonder when or where has Robin seen the King before? It is not surprising that Sir Richard might know the face of the King and, thus, kneel down. Robin's men do not respond to the face of the King but rather kneel in mimicry of Robin's own reverent kneeling—"Whan they see them knele" (1642)—as feudal retainers should. The King asks mercy of Robin for he and his men, but continuing this moment of humble reciprocity, Robin returns the King's request with one of his own: "I aske mercy, my lorde the kynge, / And for my men I-crave" (1651-52). When all is revealed (that this monk is indeed King) Robin does not pounce, nor does the King seize Robin as the Sheriff had done Sir Richard. Instead, they partake further of revelry and celebration.

With his mercy, Robin preserves the law bound in the King while the King restores Robin to the law with his pardon. This balance in the climactic greenwood scene intimates a pleasurable synthesis to what was a contentious contest between the outlaw band and the King's law. Such an end evokes the Thomistic teleology of law

itself. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas suggests that “rule and measure of human acts is reason ... Reason has its power of moving from the will ... for it is due to the fact that one wills the end, that reason issues its commands as regards things ordained to the end.”⁶⁵ Reason is, in other words, goal-oriented, and, since reason governs law, law has a teleology as well. Aquinas continues just a few passages later that “the last end of human life is bliss or happiness.”⁶⁶ For Aquinas, then, happiness is man’s ultimate goal and, here in the *Summa*, happiness is also the goal of law. We garner this very implication from the festivity of Robin and the King’s meeting. The King comes as embodied law to apprehend the outlaw, but each is reconciled to the other in mercy and humility as the two partake of feast and game.

The end of the greenwood scene, however, foretells of a less blissful conclusion, that this revelry will not be a lasting end for Robin Hood, for the law, or for the North. Granting Robin’s pardon, the King has a provision: that Robin Hood and his men come with him to court in London. Having already established London as a place of corruption, the *Gest* foreshadows Robin’s own demise. As though aware of this, Robin counters the King with his own provision—But me lyke well your servyse, / I come agayne full soone, / And shote at the donne dere, / As I am wonte to done” (1665-68). Tellingly, the King does not respond and the seventh fytt ends. The eighth fytt begins as

⁶⁵ *The Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Christian Classics, 1981), 1^a2^{ae} q. 90^a, 993-94.

⁶⁶ See Howard P. Kainz, *Natural Law: An Introduction and Re-examination* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 16-18.

the King asks, “Haste thou ony grene cloth ... / That thou wylte sell nowe to me?” (1669-70), but Edward’s appropriation of Robin’s livery does not imply his adherence to the life of the greenwood. Again, the ballad has already clarified the meaning of London and, while conditioning our reading of Robin’s journey to the capital, it also conditions our understanding of Edward’s appropriation of the Lincoln green. He will buy Robin Hood’s autonomy both figuratively and literally, bringing it back to London as his own.

“Furth He Yede To London Towne”

If the end of the seventh fytt forbodes Robin’s ruin, the *Gest* sputters forth one more brilliant scene of mutuality between the King and Robin Hood—where this chapter began—and it is the most striking scene in the entire ballad. Indistinguishably arrayed in Lincoln green, Robin and Edward ride out of the forest towards Nottingham. The King has pardoned Robin and his foresters, yet the King and his own men ride out “as if” they were outlaws—“Outlawes as they were” (1692). The people of Nottingham are so confused that they scurry around the city in terror, fearing the worst from the outlaw band: “Than every man to other gan say, / “I drede our kynge be slone: / Come Robyn Hode to the towne, iwys / On lyve he lefte never one” (1709-12). Their confusion is not mere humor. Edward will later laugh at them, but the moment of their terror highlights the remarkable nature of the King’s and the outlaw’s previous coupling. The townsmen cannot discern who is king and who is outlaw or whether their sovereign lives at all. The King who fears for his life in the greenwood when seven score of yeoman leap up

with weapons drawn, the monarch who can be killed by the outlaw (in the eyes of the townsmen), is not a figure of absolute authority. To the townsmen, the King is dead and Robin is a new sovereign-like figure riding down on them with violent intent. This moment in the *Gest* encapsulates the sovereign of the *lex regia*, the King who rules through his subjects' sanction. His power is balanced by the might and cunning of the regional authority, signified here in Robin Hood, but as their riding side by side illustrates, this regional authority still serves the King and the interests of the realm. There is no hostility here, no pride. Rather, they play game and take amusement at the lesser folk. We forget for a moment, in Robin's movement to London and in Edward's donning of the outlaw's livery, what the ballad has already forewarned. The lightness of the moment only accentuates the radical shift about to take place when Robin arrives in London, a distinct metaphor for centralization itself.

In London, under the close watch of the King, Robin's men fall away—"By than the yere was all agone / He had no man but twayne" (1737-38). Robin, further, cannot keep up with the lavish spending and greed of the court, complaining after a year in the King's company that "My welthe is went away" (1744). If his riches are gone, so is Robin's skill: "Somtyme I was an archere good / A styffe and eke a stronge" (1745-46). The intimacy between the King and the outlaw, between the King and his great subject from the North dissolves:

"Alas!" then sayd good Robyn,

"Alas and well a woo!

Yf I dwele lenger with the kynge,

Sorowe wyll me sloo.” (1749-52)

Robin “longeth sore to Bernysdale” (1765), but he does not suffer merely from homesickness. Robin’s return to the North, distancing himself from the drain of the London court, constitutes one last act of defiance, one last assertion of power, which he ritualizes when he “slewe a full grete harte” (1785) upon arriving in his familiar wood. Robin blows his horn upon which all “seven score of wyght yonge men / Came redy on a rowe” (1791-92). But things are not as they were. Robin knows his rule is fleeting, his freedom doomed. He dwells in the wood “Twenty yere and two” but “For all drede of Edwarde our kynge” (1798-99).

Robin’s own death comes, in fact, at the hands of a woman “That nye was of hys kynne” (1804). The prioress of Kirklees’s treacherous murder of Robin, in collusion with the knight Sir Roger of Donkester, testifies to the new North to which Robin has returned. Divorced of its autonomy, of the familial networks within which that autonomy and power were bound, the North resembles London, a place that lacks virtue and where self-interest proffers. The scene of Robin Hood’s death resonates with what can be viewed as the literal end of the Percy dynasty. In 1489, at Thirsk in north-central Yorkshire, an angry throng of northerners confronted the fourth Earl of Northumberland Henry Percy as he sought to collect the King’s taxes, which he ironically had opposed. The mob pulled Percy off his horse and slew him. Accounts suggest that Percy’s retainers simply watched the killing and offered no aid to their lord. In a long poem,

John Skelton rails against the northerners responsible for the death of “your chyfteyne, your shelde, your chef defence” (57), and he recalls how “Barons, knightis, squyers, one and alle, / Togeder with servaunts of his famuly / Turnd ther backis and let ther master fall” (92-94).⁶⁷ These retainers’ complacency in Percy’s death calls to mind the legality of homicide in the outlaw’s death. If the Percies, like Robin Hood, had opposed the English sovereign as “Kings in the North,” each figure ultimately becomes a *mere* outlaw—able to be killed with impunity—whose power failed under the weight of centralization and the redistribution of authority fully into the hands of an absolute monarch in the South.

⁶⁷ “Upon the Doulorous Dethe and Much Lamentable Chaunce of the Most Honorable Erle of Northumberland,” *The Poetical Works of John Skelton: Principally According to the edition of Rev. Alexander Dice* (Ann Arbor, MI: Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan Library, 2005), 8-17.

Conclusion

“That's beyond London, I reckon? And I come fro' Burnley-ways, and forty mile to th' North. And yet, yo see, North and South has both met and made kind o' friends in this big smoky place.”

--from Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*¹

Southerner Margaret Hale's loathing of the North in Elizabeth Gaskell's famous Victorian novel—"with almost a detestation for all she had ever heard of the North of England, the manufacturers, the people, the wild and bleak country"²—is not simply the product of a new social and economic geography born out of the industrialization of the North in the late seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. Gaskell's novel explores England's North-South divide, and Gaskell's northern consciousness, even her representation of northern speech—"Is yon thing upstairs really him? it doesna look like him"³—follows a long tradition of English authors pursuing the literary potentialities of this cultural rift. Gaskell's presentation of the northern idiom amuses her reader while lending a certain realism to her novel, but such literary realism finds its precursor in Chaucer. Gaskell's northernisms also reflect the twelfth-century complaints on northern speech made by the historian William of Malmesbury. The North-South divide is a phenomenon emerging in the Middle Ages and has impacted England ever since.

¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, Ed. Angus Easson (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 73.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 300.

Born in the civil conflict between the disparate kingdoms of Britain in the early medieval period, focused in the wake of the Norman Conflict and the Conqueror's forced unification of the realm in the later eleventh century, and shaped by the important histories written in the twelfth century, the divide significantly impacted early conversations about a unified English community and a premodern nation. The peculiar and, at times, spectral presence of the North haunted the English social, economic, and political landscape throughout the Middle Ages, and its effect is born out not only in those early chronicles of Anglo-Norman historians such as William, but also in the institutions on which England based its early identity, the medieval universities Oxford and Cambridge, in the work of England's seminal medieval voice, Chaucer, and in the quintessential medieval English legends of the outlaw Robin Hood.

If Henry VIII's assertion of centralized power and his seizure of northern lands in the 1530s in some way put an end to northern autonomy, the North-South divide as a conflict woven into the very fabric of English life persisted until the emergence of the industrial North in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the North we read in Gaskell's famous novel—brought new social, economic, and literary life to the real and imagined disparities between those people and landscapes above and below the Humber. Understanding the medieval emergence of the figure of the North and of the North-South divide as a significant force is seminal to examining premodern conversations about and contributions to the surfacing of an English nation and English nationalism. So too is it essential to appreciating and comprehending the chronic enmity

and social disparities that continue to haunt the divided English landscape today. I hope this study has taken steps toward this understanding.

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