Guy survived in a variety of forms and genres – *Eglamour* in ballad and dramatic form,[71] and *Guy* in devotional literature,[72] as a play and in Samuel Rowlands's twelve-canto *Famous Historie of Guy of Warwick*,[73] as well as in a number of prose retellings (including chapbooks), which continued to appear until well into the nineteenth century.[74]

Why these particular romances were still sufficiently popular by the end of the fifteenth century to be selected for publication by the printers of Tudor England, and why their ultimate fates were so different, are questions that it would be hard to answer.[75]

71 Cf. *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, ed. Richardson, pp. xli–xlii. Writing in the mid-1960s, Richardson (p. xlii) claims that ballads of Eglamour 'are still sung in schools and Boy Scout camps today'.

72 See A. S. G. Edwards, 'The *Speculum Guy de Warwick* and Lydgate's *Guy of Warwick*: The Non-Romance Middle English Tradition', in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Wiggins and Field, pp. 81–93.

73 On the play and on Rowlands's poem, see Helen Cooper, 'Guy as Early Modern English Hero', in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Wiggins and Field, pp. 185–99.

74 E.g. *The Noble and Renowned History of Guy Earl of Warwick* ... (Warwick: H. T. Cooke; Warwick and Leamington: John Merridew; Coventry: Henry Merridew, 1829).

5

Middle English Popular Romance and National Identity

THOMAS H. CROFTS and ROBERT ALLEN ROUSE

Popular romance and medieval national identity

'Who are the English; where do they come from; what constitutes the English nation?' Such were the questions regarding Englishness that Thorlac Turville-Petre posed in 1994 when he observed that 'the establishment and exploration of a sense of a national identity is a major preoccupation of English writers of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries'.[1] Turville-Petre's work, which found its most expansive form in his seminal study *England the Nation*,[2] established medieval English nationalism as a vibrant field of interest, and has led to the proliferation of studies of the development of medieval Englishness over the past decade or so. Important work by scholars such as Siobhain Bly Calkin, Geraldine Heng, and Kathy Lavezzo – amongst others – illustrates the degree to which the study of nationalism has become embedded within the practice of medieval scholarship.[3]

However, the validity of attempting to discern the origins of the English 'nation' within the literature of the medieval period has not been without its critics. Can one read the beginnings of English 'nationalism' – in the classic Andersonian sense[4] – in such pre-modern texts? Views on the issue have been polarizing: while many scholars have been quick to take up the search for a nascent medieval English national identity, others have remained more cautious. Derek Pearsall, in a response to the profusion of identifications

1 Thorlac Turville-Petre, '*Havelok* and the History of the Nation', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 121–34 (p. 121).

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

3 Much of this work has focused on the role of romance as the vehicle for such discourse: see Siobhain B. Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Kathy Lavezzo (ed.), *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Thorlac Turville-Petre, 'Afterword: The Brutus prologue to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, pp. 340–6; Robert A. Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005).

of medieval national sentiment appearing in the late 1990s, comments that 'while particular circumstances produced a momentary surge in assertions of Englishness around 1290–1340 and again in 1410–20, there was no steadily growing sense of national feeling'.[5] The debate seems – in essence – to be over what medievalists mean when they use terms such as 'nationalism' and 'national identity': are they implying 'momentary surges' or a 'steadily growing' sense of national identity? The question of whether nationalism can indeed be identified as a developing discourse in medieval English texts is further complicated by the postulated post-medieval origins of nationalism itself. Benedict Anderson, in his influential *Imagined Communities*, sums up the view that it was the Enlightenment that engendered nationalism: 'in Western Europe the eighteenth century marks … the dawn of the age of nationalism'.[6] In response to such periodized objections, medievalists have been quick to dismantle Anderson's temporally-constrained formulation, and have argued for studies on 'the discourse of the nation' to be extended back beyond the traditional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century origins of the modern nation state. Diane Speed, arguing the case for the presence of medieval nationalisms in romance, considers 'that it could be reasonably taken back to the literature of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, especially to the early romances'.[7]

The widening of the use of 'nation' as a critical tool has encouraged medievalists such as Geraldine Heng to further challenge the rigorously modern definition of nationalism, arguing that nationalist ideology is discernible in earlier literature. Heng has argued that a form of English medieval nationalism can be seen in romances such as *Richard Coer de Lyon*.[8] She writes that 'medievalists agree that from the thirteenth century onward, discourses of the nation are visible and can be read with ease in medieval England…'[9] However, Heng also points out that the medieval nationalism that she advocates is not the same as that envisaged by theorists such as Anderson:

> That nation is not, of course, a modern state: among the distinguishing properties of the medieval nation – always a community of the realm, *communitas regni* – is the symbolizing potential of the king, whose figural status allows leveling discourses and an expressive vocabulary of unity, cohesion, and stability to be imagined, in a language functioning as the linguistic equivalent of the nation's incipient modernity.[10]

5 Derek Pearsall, 'The idea of Englishness in the fifteenth century', in *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Helen Cooney (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 15–27 (p. 15).

6 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 11.

7 Diane Speed, 'The Construction of the Nation in Medieval Romance', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, pp. 135–57 (pp. 135–6).

8 Geraldine Heng, 'The Romance of England: *Richard Coer de Lyon*, Saracen, Jews, and the Politics of Race and Nation', in *The Post-Colonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 135–72.

9 Heng, 'Romance of England', p. 150.

Heng argues that an English narrative, written in English, concerning an important English figure, both reflects and contributes to a wider English national identity. Something analogous to modern nationalist ideology is at work in these texts, and while it may not be the process of national identity formation as delineated by Anderson, it can certainly be understood as an example of the development of an imagined group identity.[11]

The place of medieval romance within the discourse of medieval Englishness has been highlighted from the beginnings of the debate. From Turville-Petre's reading of *Havelok the Dane* to the often-critiqued nationalist fantasy of *Richard Coer de Lyon*, romance has proved to be a particularly fecund ground for the analysis of the nature of medieval Englishness. Heng comments that the 'characteristic freedom of romance to merge fantasy and reality without distinction or apology, and the ability of the medium to transform crisis into celebration and triumphalism, mean that romance has special serviceability for nationalist discourse'.[12] The nationalist content of Middle English popular romance should show itself, if it shows itself anywhere, deployed against the Frenchness of the Charlemagne romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It might reasonably be expected that the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) may have conjured in popular romance – if not in Chaucer, Gower or the *Gawain*-poet – some war-time expression of Englishness, oriented against the French. If the popular romance of this period did shape an English national identity, the existence of Middle English romances which treat the Matter of France (stories of Charlemagne, the great French king, and his knights) in neither chauvinistic terms nor with any especial praise of Frenchness must be explained. Heng's 'special serviceability' does not place itself in the service of any nationalism in the Andersonian sense.

Complex Englishness(es)

Amongst the romances of the fourteenth century, much recent work has focused upon those that are to be found in the Auchinleck MS (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1). Describing this celebrated manuscript, which includes some sixteen different romances, as 'a handbook of the nation', Turville-Petre argues that the manuscript's narrative of England, written in English, 'does not simply recognise a social need but is an expression of the very character of the manuscript, of its passion for England and its pride in being English'.[13] Produced during the 1330s,

11 Heng suggests that it is Anderson's concept of the nation as essentially an 'imagined community' that permits the notion of a medieval 'nation' ('Romance of England', p. 150).

12 Heng, *Empire of Magic*, p. 67.

13 Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, pp. 112, 138. Phillipa Hardman discusses the national character of the Auchinleck MS and examines Englishness within a number of other miscellany manuscripts in 'Compiling the Nation: Fifteenth-Century Miscellany Manuscripts', in *Nation,*

the Auchinleck MS represents a confluence of the height of the popularity of romance within England with the burgeoning sense of English national identity that developed in response to the historical crises of the previous decades.[14] Romances such as *Richard Coer de Lyon*, *Guy of Warwick*, *Bevis of Hampton* and others have been examined as sites of the articulation and negotiation of English identity, both within and without their manuscript context.[15] The Auchinleck romances are deployed within the manuscript to provide a set of powerfully articulated answers to Turville-Petre's questions as to the nature and origins of the English people.

Popular romance plays an important role in the development of English identity during the Middle Ages. What, however, is the nature of this Englishness? Do we envisage a homogeneous construction of national identity – Anderson's 'imagined community' of shared values and experience – or should we expect to find a more fragmented, disparate, and complex manifestation of group identity? As more work has been performed upon the romances of English heroes, a clearer – or perhaps murkier – picture of the nature of medieval Englishness has begun to emerge: one that is complicated by ties between England and the continent, regionalisms within England itself, and even worrying similarities with the Saracen Other. While much work has been done to map the limits of English identity, many questions remain to be answered as to its disparate shapes and forms.

The troublesome task of trying to map identity in medieval romance is well illustrated in the romance of *Guy of Warwick* through the series of epithets with which the text identifies its hero, who is progressively – and simultaneously – *Gij of Warwike* (157), *Gij þe Englisse* (3889), and Guy the *Cristen* (110:5), thus representing a complex hierarchy of group affinities, from region, to country, to Christendom. These overlapping identities – Guy's ever-expanding 'territories of the self'[16] – are in no way contradictory when applied to the individual knight, reflecting a historical reality of the multiple allegiances demanded of such chivalric figures. However, when applied to the idea of a developing Englishness, we can immediately see the potential conflicts in such a formulation of group identity: what occurs – one asks – if the interests of region and nation conflict? Is one first and foremost

14 The historian Maurice Powicke identifies the expression of Englishness witnessed during Edward I's crises of the 1290s as an early form of nationalism, declaring that 'it was in Edward's reign that nationalism was born' (*The Thirteenth Century, 1216–1307*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), p. 528).

15 Of the Auchinleck romances, *Guy of Warwick* and *Bevis of Hampton* have attracted much recent attention, as can be seen in two comprehensive treatments of the romances and their wider narrative traditions: *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Alison Wiggins and Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007); *Sir Bevis of Hampton in Literary Tradition*, ed. Jennifer Fellows and Ivana Djordjević (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008).

English, or a man of Warwick? And what happens to the fantasy of Christendom when an English knight is called upon to fight the French, as was so often the case during this period? Just such anxieties as to the coherence and stability of identity categories come to the fore in the romances, and in *Guy of Warwick*, at least, we find the solution embodied in the form of the Saracen.[17] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reads images of the Saracen in romance as acting to simplify the inherent complexities of individual and national identity.[18] By adhering to the binary paradigm of Christian as good and Saracen as evil, the oppositional model of identity formation produces a construction of identity that, while reductive, allows a clearer and less problematic definition of self and nation. In relation to the English romances, Cohen has suggested that 'protracted, messy nearby wars in Ireland, Spain, and especially France spurred the English romancers to dream of a time when self-identity was easy to assert, because the enemy was wholly Other (dark skin, incomprehensible language, pagan culture) and therefore an unproblematic body to define oneself against'.[19] *Guy of Warwick* acts to elide the inherent complexities of fourteenth-century English national identity, producing a cultural fantasy in which English subsumes Christian, and presents the reader with an avatar of Englishness that retains its corporeal integrity even after death in the sanctified body of Guy.

However, not all romances are as clearly fantastic in their identity politics as *Guy of Warwick* is, and its manuscript bedfellow *Bevis of Hampton* provides a wonderful counter-piece to the simplicity of *Guy*'s conception of Englishness. Some of the problems in positing a homogeneous Englishness are brought into relief within the curiously hybridized body of Bevis. Bevis is, in many ways, a strange and unsettling example of an English knight. Born the son of an English earl, he is exiled as a boy and brought up in a Saracen kingdom; he marries a Saracen princess, and – after a brief and turbulent return to the land of his birth – ultimately abandons England for the lands of the East. *Bevis* stands as a complex narrative of Englishness, drawing our attention to some of the many difficulties and anxieties within the fantasy of English national identity during the medieval period.[20]

There are two chief complicating factors that impact upon the coherence of the medieval fantasy of Englishness in this romance. First, there is the question of Bevis's connections with the Saracen East – his upbringing, his

17 For an analysis of the use of the Saracen in *Guy of Warwick*, see Robert A. Rouse, 'Expectation vs Experience: Encountering the Saracen Other in Middle English Romance', *SELIM: Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature* 10 (2002), 125–40, and 'An Exemplary Life: Guy of Warwick as Medieval Culture Hero', in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Wiggins and Field, pp. 94–109.

18 Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), pp. 132–3.

19 Cohen, *Of Giants*, p. 133.

20 For a full account of the complex identities found within *Bevis of Hampton* see Robert A. Rouse, 'For King and Country? The Tension between National and Regional Identities in *Sir Bevis of*

marriage, his horse, and his kingdom – connections which, we argue, raise serious concerns about the cultural identity of Western knights who spend a prolonged period of time in the Orient. To encounter the Other physically is to enter into what has been termed a 'contact zone',[21] and such proximity brings with it risks of external contamination of one's own culture. In a recent reading of *Bevis* through the lens of postcolonial theory, Kofi Campbell argues that 'this text functions as an early example of narrating the nation. It seeks to educate its audience as to what comprises Englishness and, equally importantly, what does not ... The Saracens are there to make clearer the bounds of England and Christianity.'[22] For Campbell, *Bevis* is primarily a text that concerns itself with the delineation and the territorial expansion of Englishness. Campbell points out the theoretical commonplace that romances such as *Guy of Warwick*, *The Sultan of Babylon*, and *Richard Coer de Lyon* utilize the figure of the Saracen in an early form of Orientalism, situating in the racial and religious Other all those things against which medieval Christendom was defined. However, in working hard to reconcile the difficulties of the narrative with a postcolonial reading of the text, Campbell too readily sutures the inherent fractures within the rhetoric of identity with which *Bevis* presents its readers. Colonial expansion, the fantasy of which Campbell rightly identifies as an important ideological concern in *Bevis*, brings its own fears and anxieties to the populace of the imperial homeland. While it is indeed true that encounters with the Saracen Other are an important part of the medieval poetics of otherness, there are also concomitant fears of cultural infection and miscegenation. While Campbell argues that Bevis after his fashion makes the East English, we must remind ourselves that acculturation is rarely unidirectional, and even the dominant culture in the process is itself changed through colonial and other forms of cultural interaction.[23] Calkin notes that Bevis and Josian – 'the convert–Christian couple' – seem ill-suited to life in Christian England, but must instead depart to 'a kingdom close to Saracen lands and interests'.[24] Bevis stands within his romance as a complex manifestation of hybrid English–Eastern identity, seemingly never comfortable upon his return to the land of his birth, and continually forced back to the East in order to carve out a new Christian kingdom that can accommodate him and his converted bride.

While the Englishness embodied by Bevis can be seen to be subject to anxieties relating to external contamination, this is not the only problem-

21 A 'contact zone' is a space of cultural encounter, in which peoples geographically and historically distanced come into contact and establish ongoing relations: cf. Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

22 Kofi Campbell, 'Nation-building Colonialist-style in *Bevis of Hampton*', *Exemplaria* 18:1 (2006), 205–32 (p. 232).

23 The two-way street of acculturation is also evident in other medieval romances. For a discussion of this phenomenon in *Havelok the Dane*, see Robert A. Rouse, '*In his time were gode lawes*: Romance, Law, and the Anglo-Saxon Past', in *Cultural Encounters in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 69–83.

24 Calkin, *Saracens*, p. 85.

atic aspect of national identity raised in the romance. The homogeneity of Englishness is also at issue within the bounds of England itself. *Bevis*, a narrative with an avowedly regional focus (Hampshire), manifests an anxiety concerning centralized power in the body of the king and the locus of London. Through this regional narrative of identity, the text is forced to negotiate claims of group identities other than that of simply 'English'. Rosalind Field's statement that medieval romance operates 'to create a history for a country, a family, a city' at once identifies the broad scope of the romance mode of narrative history and alerts us to the competing historiographical voices that such romances may contain.[25] The importance of an appreciation of the tension between national and regional voices within medieval historiography is clear. Michelle Warren has highlighted the importance of recognizing the regional origins of writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Robert of Gloucester, and Layamon, to name but three.[26] A powerful regional discourse can be seen to run through *Bevis* – one that manifests itself in Bevis's repeated conflicts with centralized royal authority in the form of King Edgar. In her analysis of *Richard Coer de Lyon*, Heng identifies the figure of the king as occupying a central and symbolic place within the articulation of the medieval English nation.[27] In *Bevis*, however, the figure of King Edgar is anything but a unifying symbol of English identity: he does not act when Bevis's father is murdered; he does nothing to return Bevis's usurped lands and title until Bevis confronts him over his inaction; he intemperately and illegally attempts to prosecute Bevis for Arundel's killing of his larcenous son; and he stands by impotently while the people of London attempt to murder Bevis at the instigation of one of his vassals. An examination of the interactions between Bevis and King Edgar illustrates the inherent tensions between region and centre that exist in *Bevis*. In its presentation of its hero's similarities with the Saracen and his differences from his fellow Englishmen, *Bevis* can be read as representing the internal tensions and external anxieties that were important concerns for the nascent fantasy of English identity during the Middle Ages. If we can derive one important conclusion from these complexities, it is perhaps that we should be careful not to ascribe to the medieval English national identity portrayed in medieval romances such as *Bevis* the monolithic homogeneity that we have come to expect from the forms of nationalism prevalent in the modern age.

25 Rosalind Field, 'Romance in England, 1066–1400', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 152–76 (p. 162).

26 Michelle Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

27 Heng, 'Romance of England', p. 139.

The Problem of the French: The Middle English Charlemagne

Any expectation that these romances will show anti-French sentiment is soon disappointed: Auchinleck itself includes two Middle English Charlemagne romances, *Roland and Vernagu* and *Otuel a Knight*.[28] Points of contact between the Matter of France and the reading material of the English suggest that either a) it was a non-issue for romance, which was very busy doing other things, or that b) appropriation, rather than polarization, was the chief register of national difference. There is not scope here for an exhaustive demonstration, but we should preface the following analysis of *The Sege off Melayne* with the few points enumerated below, which can be taken to be representative of this commonality among the Charlemagne romances: that when a specifically English or British national spirit is found, it is neither a hostile nor even a separatist one.

> Auchinleck's inclusion of Charlemagne romances *Otuel* and *Roland and Vernagu* along with English romances such as *Guy of Warwick*, *Arthour and Merlin*, and *Sir Tristrem*, as well as the metrical chronicles *Liber Regum Anglie* and *Richard Coer de Lyon*.
>
> Writers across and between genres were happy to find, or to invent, genealogical threads uniting the French and English heroes: in the Middle English *Turpine's Story* Roland's father Milo de Angleris is claimed as an Englishman, 'Milo of Engelond, a worthy warrioure' (fol. 328rb);[29] in *Sir Tristrem* the eponymous hero is Roland's own son.[30]
>
> In William Caxton's chivalric and 'Worthies' books, Charlemagne sits next to King Arthur as an exemplar of good kingship.
>
> In *The Sege of Melayne* the English poet, who habitually refers to French heroes as 'oure ferse men', 'oure worthy men', 'oure folke', does not otherwise invest his lyric identity with nationality. The single surviving copy of *Sege* is in a manuscript noted for its religious materials, the London Thornton manuscript (British Library, MS Additional 31042); these include

28 Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman, 'How English Are the English Charlemagne Romances?', in *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 43–55 (p. 45, n. 10).

29 Stephen H. A. Shepherd, 'The Middle English Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle', *Medium Aevum* 65:1 (1996), 19–34. The translator makes him back into a Frenchman at fol. 330vb, but not before repeating the 'mistranslation' (at fol. 329ra) with an unmistakable relish: 'þere where on kynge Charlis parte martird for þe Feythe and for þe loue of God .xl. thousonnde Cristen men, and amonge þem Duke Milo, a worthi warrioure, a worthi Englyssh lorde, fadur of þat worshipfull knyht Rowlonde (f. 329ra)'. Shepherd is right to detect 'a nationalistic fervour intent on laying claim to that greatest of heroes, Roland', and he observes that 'One senses that the later passage which identifies Milo as a Frenchman was left untouched by mistake' (p. 26).

30 For a recent exploration of Tristram's connection with Roland in both *Sir Tristrem* and *Castleford's Chronicle*, see Caroline D. Eckhardt and Bryan A. Meer, 'Constructing a Medieval Genealogy: Roland the Father of Tristan in "Castelford's Chronicle"', *Modern Language Notes* 115:5

> *The Siege of Jerusalem*, *Cursor Mundi*, and *The Northern Passion*, as well as a second Charlemagne romance, *Rowlande and Ottuell*.[31]

Nevertheless, criticism has supposed enough nationalist feeling in and around English romance that some special explanation for the existence of the Charlemagne poems must exist. The traditional explanation is that their popularity came from a Christian militancy shared by England and France. It was, Dieter Mehl writes, 'chiefly the militant and completely intolerant Christianity of the Charlemagne stories that interested the English adapters, and it seems very likely that most of the English versions are to be attributed to clerical authors'.[32] This characterization sounds right. As Alan Lupack observes, 'almost all the Charlemagne romances are couched in terms of religious struggle'.[33] Whatever of the nature of the *Chanson de Roland* is lacking in Middle English Charlemagne romances, religious warfare remains the defining virtue of the Matter, explaining their presence in London Thornton, at least.

The crusade-style conflict between Christendom and Islam is indeed the characteristic feature of the Matter of France; it is, in Helen Cooper's usage, the matter's oldest and most recognizable *meme*. But this does not mean that the holy-war convention guarantees any one particular kind of poem. Rather, it informs the reader of the conventional background the poet will be working with or against:

> The very familiarity of the pattern of the motif, the meme, alerts the reader to certain kinds of shaping and significance, and sets up expectations that the author can fulfill or frustrate. The same motif will not always mean the same thing, or in the same ways: familiarity with the model is used precisely to highlight difference. The infinite adaptation of narrative material becomes a kind of shorthand for meaning, since it draws on what the audience already knows but reconfigures it in different ways.[34]

This is a familiar effect: medieval romancers have shown that you can reinvent King Arthur with no loss of recognition – or participation – as long as one or more of the regular features is present: Gawain, Guinevere, a feast. If it is a Charlemagne romance, there *will* be a holy war of some kind (and also, usually, a moment when Charlemagne is separated from his peers),[35]

31 On the London Thornton MS, see John J. Thompson, *Robert Thornton and the London Thornton Manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987). This manuscript is not to be confused with the Lincoln Thornton, as discussed in Mills and Rogers in this volume.

32 *Middle English Romances*, p. 152.

33 *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1990), p. 4.

34 *English Romance in Time*, p. 15.

35 *Rauf Coilyear*, for instance, lacks the immediate context of war against the Saracens – though there is a fight with one – but takes its cue from the motif of Charles being cut off from his men

but this element is subject to as many variations as there are romances. It is perhaps the very constancy of the holy-war *meme* that gives the Middle English Charlemagne-poet license to change things, to move things around, to cover up or expose this or that area of familiar wallpaper.

Robert Warm identifies a paradox in the production of the Middle English Charlemagne romances:

> Why was it that during a period of prolonged Anglo-French hostility, in a conflict which many commentators have defined as being instrumental in establishing a sense of English identity, romances which dealt with French heroes, French military successes, were being composed, copied, circulated and read throughout England?[36]

Such observations constitute a paradox only if the following things are assumed: that 'national identity' is necessarily equated with a simplistic and intolerant chauvinism – as we see, for example, in *Richard Coer de Lyon*; that such chauvinism is in turn promoted, and in a knee-jerk manner, by cultural productions such as chivalric romances; and that late medieval Anglo-French hostility had a universally polarizing effect on French and English subjectivity.

Nevertheless, simplifying Mehl's conclusion, Warm argues that Middle English Charlemagne-romancers overcome their nationalist, anti-French feelings by means of a transcendent piety: 'They are deliberately ignoring the deadly rivalry between the two countries, and constructing an idealized vision of the past, within which true Christian knights fought the infidel rather than one another.'[37] It requires the higher seriousness of religion and piety to heal, if only provisionally, the mutual hatred of the English and French. This – artificially, perhaps – puts the reader of Middle English Matter of France romances in the position of looking for both a nationalist content within the poems and a transnational piety which effaces it.

But a wide view of the material strongly suggests that the romances in question are too various in their plots, innovations, and areas of emphasis to be defined according to either agenda, and that, if anything, the agenda which these romances do serve (more or less) is neither national nor religious, but *chivalric*. An instructive comparison between *The Sege off Melayne* and the cognate Middle English 'crusade-romance' *Capystranus* is made by Stephen H. A. Shepherd. The subject of *Capystranus* is the Turkish siege of Belgrade, which was raised in 1456 (the *terminus a quo* of the poem), and while it is

846–62). See *The English Charlemagne Romances, Part II: 'The Sege off Melayne'* and *'The Romance of Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell of Spaine' together with a fragment of 'The Song Roland'*, ed. Sidney J. Herrtage, EETS ES 35 (London, 1880).

36 Robert Warm, 'Identity, Narrative and Participation: defining a context for the Middle English Charlemagne romances', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 87–100 (p. 87).

thus not a Charlemagne romance, it shares many otherwise uncommon plot elements with *Sege*.[38] A comparison between the first stanza of *The Sege off Melayne* and that *Capystranus*, while not conclusive, will gesture towards the present argument.

O Myghty Fader in heven on hye,
One God and Persones thre
　That made bothe daye and nyght—
And after, as it was thy wyll,
Thyn owne Sone thou sent us tyll
　In a mayden to lyght;
Syth, the Jewes that were wylde
Hanged Hym that was so mylde,
　And to dethe Hym dyght;
Whan He was deed, the sothe to saye,
To lyfe He rose on the thyrde daye
　Thoroughe His owne might (*Capystranus*, 1–12)

All werthy men that luffes to here
Off chivalry that before us were
　That doughty weren of dede—
Off Charlles of Fraunce, the heghe Kynge of alle
That ofte sythes made hethyn men for-to falle
　That styffely satte one stede—
This geste es sothe; wittnes the buke,
The ryghte lele trouthe, whoso will luke,
In cronekill for-to rede.
Alle Lumbardy, thay made thaire mone,
And saide thair gammunes weren alle gone,
Owttrayede with hethen thede (*The Sege off Melayne*, 1–12)

The secular leaders of the *Capystranus* are entirely subordinated to the invocation of Christ quoted above, which continues until line 35, when Charlemagne is invoked as a past leader against Islam. *The Sege* never takes its eyes from Charlemagne or his men for any similar length of time. While the relationship between these poems is far more complex than can be told in a bare juxtaposition, it is worth noting that, in their respective opening lines, two distinctly different games are afoot.

The Sege off Melayne

Of the three groups into which the English Charlemagne material falls,[39] *The Sege off Melayne* belongs to the so-called 'Otinel' (or 'Otuel') family of

38 In *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (London: W. W. Norton, 1995), pp. 391–408.

39 The other two are the 'Sultan of Babylon' (or 'Ferumbras') group and the 'detached' romances

French Charlemagne romances, in which a Saracen knight of that name does battle with a Christian hero (here Roland), and is defeated and converted. In fact, this combat does not occur in *The Sege off Melayne*, which is placed in the Otinel group based on its having Garcy as the ruler of Lombardy (which is the case in all the Otinel stories). *The Sege off Melayne* records a story not found in any of the French originals, and which, according to Mehl, probably originated in England.[40]

As mentioned above, the Middle English *Sege*-poet's tendency throughout the narrative is to refer to French heroes as 'our': in direct discourse (not in speeches) the first person plural pronoun occurs twenty-two times as 'oure', twice as 'us'. Shepherd, noting that 'the density of such reference [in *The Sege*] is unmatched in other Middle English romances', suggests it is meant 'to evoke from us a strong sense of partisanship with the Christian forces'.[41] In addition, the first-person plural can also have an 'English' possibility. The genitive form is used with special emphasis in the phrase 'Oure Bretons' – signalling the arrival of reinforcements from Brittany – which occurs five times in fifty-three lines (1495–1545). Without wishing to impugn either the honesty or geographical knowledge of the poet or his audience, it is worth pointing out that *Breton*, which properly means 'from Brittany', is recorded in Middle English romance as a spelling of *Briton*, 'someone British',[42] and that this was an imprecision, or an ambiguity, of which the *Sege*-poet (or his scribes) might have made some use:

> Oure Bretons bolde that fresche come in
> Thoghte that thay wolde wirchipp wyn
> And gatt the cante of the hill. (lines 1525–27)

Even if it is a momentary or accidental effect, the repetition of 'Oure Bretons', in a war-like romance such as this, has an ambiguous capability which – especially if the poem was read aloud – would be hard to miss.

The main protagonist of *The Sege off Melayne* is Archbishop Turpin. As Lupack observes, the romance 'achieves some originality through its emphasis on Turpin as the military, political, spiritual, and moral center of the poem' (107).[43] Turpin was never a minor character: in *Chanson de Roland* he is, with Roland and Oliver, one of the three Franks still alive, if barely, when the Saracen attack is turned. His deeds in combat and his rousing speeches, which include colourful battlefield taunts, are among the *Chanson*'s most memorable features. The poetry of the crusade tradition allows (and the

40 *Middle English Romances*, p. 153.

41 *Middle English Romances*, ed. Shepherd, p. 275, n. 1. See also Ailes and Hardman, 'How English Are the English Charlemagne Romances?', p. 53.

42 *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, line 1449: 'Thane the Bretons brothely brochez theire stedez'; *Arthur*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS OS (London, 1869), line 15: 'Bretones haf hym þat name'. Malory used *Bretayne* to signify either place.

43 Lupack, *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, p. 107.

Chanson-tradition requires) Turpin to be priest and a warrior at the same time. His clerical status only adds to his heroism: Turpin has always been a puissant and unconflicted killer on the battlefield. The Middle English *Song of Roland* fragment vigorously affirms this:

> turpyn turnyd hym, and met him again,
> sat sadly in his sadill, soothe for to sayn:
> man and horse doune he laid,
> from the croun to the brest: 'Ly þer!' he said.
> hym he cursed, and rode further still,
> And bad the fleyng fend fetche hym to helle. (lines 970–5)

Thus Turpin assumes his place among the lay heroes of the poem. In *The Sege off Melayne*, however, it is Turpin himself who embodies, to an almost Homeric degree, the time-honoured mixture of heroism and mental unbalance.

Considering that the protagonist of *The Sege off Melayne* is a cleric (as Mehl has observed the author probably was also), Warm's notion that the ruling principle of Charlemagne romances is their piety is presumably, in this case at least, a safe suggestion. *The Sege* is frequently noted for its fervently Christian aspect, in which 'hagiographic, devotional, and Eucharistic themes are used to depict a Christian community characterized by strength in the face of adversity'.[44] Turpin takes centre stage as the main conduit of Christian grace, administering a miraculously-supplied battlefield Eucharist. He also undergoes saint-like physical suffering and retains a formidable capacity for endurance, which includes refusing medical attention after receiving a grievous wound in fighting, addressing an exasperated Charles thus:

> 'What! wenys thou, Charls,' he saide, 'that I faynte bee
> For a spere was in my thee [thigh]
> A glace thorowte my syde.
> Criste for me suffered mare.
> He askede no salve to His sare
> Ne no more sall I this tyde.' (lines 1342–7)

He also refuses to eat or drink until Milan is retaken. Turpin's mental and physical turbulence drive the poem, supplying the martial prowess and access to the divine proper to an ideally imagined crusade.

At the same time, that propriety is exceeded by a blasphemous invective right about the middle of the poem. When Turpin learns of the slaughter of French troops at Milan, the Archbishop throws down his mitre and crozier and begins to curse the Virgin Mary, expressing a wish that she had never been born:

44 Suzanne Conklin Akbari, 'Incorporation in the *Siege of Melayne*', in *Pulp Fictions*, pp. 22–44 (p. 23).

'Hade thou noghte, Marye, yitt bene borne,
Na had noghte oure gud men thuis bene lorne.
The wyte [blame] is all in the.
Thay faught holly in thy ryghte
That thus with dole to dede er dyghte.
A Marie, how may this bee?'
The Bischoppe was so woo that stownd
He wolde noghte byde appon the grownnd
A sakerynge[45] for to see;
Bot forthe he went – his handis he wrange—
And flote[46] with Marye ever amange
for the losse of oure menyee. (lines 553–64)

Warm affirms that 'Turpin's major function in the world of the poem is to re-establish the primacy of religious authority, and forcefully reassert the importance of religion in a world increasingly guided by secular powers',[47] but is silent regarding this outburst, which makes all the familiar pagan-materialist 'mistakes' about religion. Turpin here is in fact reminiscent of the comically enraged title character of *The Sowdone of Babylone*, who thrice throws his idols into the fire. Unlike the Sultan, whose priests make him retrieve his gods from the fire and do vigorous penitence, Turpin is not made to show remorse. In fact, he next refuses to say mass, or to say good morning to Charlemagne.

Shepherd, placing Turpin's speech in the context of other crusade narratives in which 'expressions of anger at the Godhead … attend the propaganda and the historical accounts', argues that it is appropriate, and even 'normative', within crusaders' vassal-and-lord concept of their service to God.[48] Suzanne Conklin Akbari suggests 'it is important not to overemphasise the significance of Turpin's action toward Mary', pointing out that saint-abuse is a somewhat common practice in the Middle Ages.[49] Whatever is true of medieval *praxis* – and it seems a little dangerous to rely on historical practice to make sense of this (or any) romance – it would seem to impose an artificial limitation not to give this speech its due. While the holy-war context pointed out by Shepherd mitigates the blasphemy, the Middle English popular-romance context does not. Turpin here fully expresses the heathen notion that a god who does not help you win is useless. As Maldwyn Mills confesses of the passage, 'it is very difficult to avoid the feeling that he is being presented as a pagan'.[50]

45 That is, 'a consecration of the mass' (Lupack, *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, p. 125).
46 The poet's choice of words is noteworthy: Turpin 'flote' (line 563), that is, engaged in the colloquy generally reserved for foes: *OED* '(1) To contend, strive; also, to contend in words, chide, wrangle.'
47 Warm, 'Identity, Narrative', p. 90.
48 *Middle English Romances*, ed. Shepherd, pp. 389–90.
49 Akbari, 'Incorporation in the *Siege of Melayne*', p. 27

The poet has, for at least a moment, allowed the character of Turpin to take on a monstrous aspect. Like Milo's Englishness in *Turpines Story*, Turpin's condition is not permanent: the Archbishop's stirring battlefield mass and deadly prowess still lie ahead.

A speech such as Turpin's here might be shocking but funny in the *Sowdone of Babylone*, which has a wonderful comic register, but in *The Sege off Milan* it seems perverse, and it is not retracted. It is difficult not to see in it an elevation of martial and chivalric imperatives over religious ones. In this it would harmonize with the two prose texts we have already mentioned: William Caxton's *Charles the Grete*, and the Middle English *Turpines Story*. Caxton, who admonished his English audience to 'rede Froissart'[51] in order to learn about chivalry, offers a ready indication of Charlemagne's appeal for English readers. His *Charles the Grete* – a translation of the French *Ferumbras*, whose third book corresponds to the *Pseudo-Turpin* matter – shows the printer's awareness of generic imperatives: in the book's preface, Charlemagne and his paladins are committed to 'the exaltacyon of the Crysten faith and to the confusion of the hethen sarazyns and myscreaunts, whiche is a werk wel contemplatyf for to lyve wel'.[52] This passage, however, is from the part of the *Charles* preface which Caxton translated from his original (Garbin's *Fierabras*, 1483); in the portion written by Caxton there is no mention of fighting heathens, despite his willingness to promote this cause elsewhere.[53] When Charlemagne is mentioned in Caxton's own words, it is with specific reference to his 'vertues chyvalry',[54] as one of the Worthies, and – in a list of chivalric characters – as 'the grete Emperour of Allemayne and Kynge of Fraunce, whose noble actes and conquests ben wreton in large volumes with the noble faytes and actes of his douzepieres, that is to saye, Rowlond and Olyver'.[55] Heroic tales of the Frankish king were not an affront to English chivalry but rather a continuation of it.

The fifteenth-century *Turpines Story* is a Middle English translation of the highly sermonic Latin *Pseudo-Turpin* chronicle.[56] The English text departs noticeably from the Latin text's (and the tradition's) tendency to admonish warrior-heroes for their excesses: for example, the Latin text's 'wine and women' passage, in which King Marsile conveys the gift of wine and women

51 *Order of Chyualry* (c. 1484); see *Caxton's Own Prose*, ed. N. F. Blake (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973), p. 126; or *The Order of Chyualry*, in *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, ed. W. J. B. Crotch, EETS OS 176 (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 83.
52 *Charles the Grete* (1485); see Blake, *Caxton*, pp. 66–67; Crotch, *Prologues*, p. 95.
53 See Meg Roland, 'Arthur and the Turks', *Arthuriana* 16:1 (2006), 29–42.
54 *Caxton's Own Prose*, ed. Blake, p. 84; *Prologues and Epilogues*, ed. Crotch, p. 106.
55 *Caxton's Own Prose*, ed. Blake, p. 139; omitted in Crotch.
56 A chronicle which circulated in, among other languages, Old French, Anglo-Norman, medieval Welsh and medieval Irish, and whose tradition also produced the romances *Roland and Vernagu* and *Otuel and Roland* which together form a verse translation and compression of an Old French *Pseudo-Turpin*. The Middle English *Song of Roland* incorporates Pseudo-Turpin's 'wine and women' interlude. *The Sege off Melayne* draws from Pseudo-Turpin's lore (*Middle English*

to the Christian army, providing an apt occasion for asserting divine retribution. As Shepherd points out, the Latin text provides not only that the fornicators (and even, for good measure, the non-fornicators among them) were justly punished with death, but also introduces examples from classical history of generals who, to their confusion, brought their wives on campaign; priests are then singled out and reminded that drinking and fornication lead to eternal damnation. The Middle English *Song of Roland* preserves the episode thus:

> wyn went betwen þem, non did astert,
> þat gwynlon to toun brought, euyll him betid!
> It swymyd in ther hedis and mad hem to nap;
> they wist not what þey did, so þer wit failid.
> when they wer in bed and thought to a restid,
> they went to the women þat wer so hend,
> that wer sent fro saragos of sairsins kind:
> they synnyd so sore in þat ylk while
> that many men wept and cursid þat vile. (68–76)

Here the sermonizing is muted to the 'sore sinning' and morning-after anguish of lines 75–6. But even this is omitted in *Turpines Story*, where it is specified that Ganelon brought wine and women, and that 'the grete and þe worthy warriours, þey toke þe wynne, and þe lasse toke the women, to þeyer grete arme' (34.1122–3). *Turpine's Story* uses the wine and women to distinguish the great warriors from the lesser, but is much more sedulous to portray Ganelon's treachery – his part in putting Roland and Oliver in the rearguard – than anything else. When *Turpines Story* returns to the subject of wine and women, it is only to say:

> But þe nyht after þis, many of þe oste were dronke of þat wynne and toke many of þucke [those same] women and so were dede. Wat more?
> (35.1129–32)

Here we do not encounter the mental or spiritual anguish of the Middle English *Song of Roland* – nor is there any mention of sin. The English *Turpine*-author, Shepherd concludes, evidently 'preferred to examine the tribulations of warriors more than the lapses of sinners'.[57] The preaching of the Latin *Pseudo-Turpin* would probably have been as out of place here as it would have been in Caxton's *Charles the Grete*.

In *The Sege off Melayne*, Charlemagne himself, unable to overrule his own blasphemous bishop, represents a comic absence of that unifying energy we learn of in the biographies of the historical emperor by Einhard and Notker. Like King Edgar of *Bevis*, mentioned above, Charlemagne does not bestow

his regnal stamp on nation or narrative, but is himself measured against the heroism and gravity of his subject. If an imagined community is sought in the Middle English Charlemagne romances it is unlikely to be 'nationalist' in any stable sense of the term. These romances fall in line with Froissart's doctrine, preached by Caxton, of chivalry, and not nationhood, as the touchstone of aristocratic self-identity.

A body of romances such as the Middle English Matter of France presents yet another complicating factor in the assessment of romance nationalisms during the medieval period. While identifiable discourses of the nation can be read in some of these popular romances, other narratives present more complex challenges for the critic. As such, the corpus of Middle English romance stands as a salient reminder of the difficulties of generalizing about medieval genres, bringing us back to the truism that each text presents its own unique contexts, meanings, and problems for the reader. Medieval popular romances, despite their often highly repetitious and derivative nature, continue to demand individual detailed attention, lest we be lulled by their familiar rhythm into the belief that they speak with one voice.