

For King and Country?  
The Tension between National and Regional  
Identities in *Sir Bevis of Hampton*

ROBERT ALLEN ROUSE

The discourse of national identity in medieval England has been the subject of much critical debate in the past decade. The publication in 1996 of Thorlac Turville-Petre's *England the Nation* established the study of medieval English nationalism as a vibrant and important field of study, and numerous additions to the debate over the origins, development and nature of medieval notions of Englishness have appeared since. Important studies by scholars such as Siobhain Bly Calkin, Geraldine Heng, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Kathy Lavezzo illustrate the degree to which the study of nationalism has become embedded within the practice of medieval scholarship.<sup>1</sup> This chapter seeks to examine the narrative of English identity found in *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, reconsidering it in the light of two important geographical foci of the romance – the region of Hampshire and the lands of the East – in order to highlight the complexities of identity that are suggested by Bevis's continual geographical relocation within the romance.

*Bevis* is, as Turville-Petre has argued, a text that is deeply concerned with the construction of Englishness. In describing the Auchinleck MS (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1), the home of the best-known and oldest extant Middle English version of *Bevis*, as 'a handbook of

<sup>1</sup> See Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 7–10; Geraldine Heng, *The Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 6–8; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Kathy Lavezzo, *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. vii–xxxiv; Thorlac Turville-Petre, 'Afterword: the Brutus prologue to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *ibid.*, pp. 340–6; Robert Allen Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, *Studies in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), pp. 70–5; and, for a counter-argument, Derek Pearsall, 'The idea of Englishness in the fifteenth century', in *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. by Helen Cooney (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 15–27.

*National and Regional Identities in Sir Bevis of Hampton*

the nation',<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup> The individual romances within the manuscript contribute to the construction of the manuscript's idea of Englishness – as Heng's analysis of *Richard Coer de Lyon* has demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> While the historical royal figure of Richard I is one embodiment of the English nation in the Auchinleck MS, in *Bevis* we witness another important narrative space in which Englishness is constructed. In this respect the Middle English *Bevis* differs from its antecedent, the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Hamtoun*: as Susan Crane notes, '*Sir Beues of Hamtoun* undertakes an important development, whose beginnings are barely discernible in *Boeve*, from the perception of the baronial family as a political unit owing personal allegiance to rulers on the basis of reciprocal support, to a wider perception of national identity and the importance of national interests.'<sup>5</sup>

The degree to which the Auchinleck *Bevis* (hereafter A) has been refocused towards this ideological task can be seen in the additions to the text that were made during its redaction: a number of unique additions to the Auchinleck romances can be seen as a direct result of the manuscript's attempt to 'English' the texts.<sup>6</sup> One of the unique aspects of A is a reference to St George that occurs during Bevis's battle with the dragon of Cologne. Weary and battered from his day-long combat, Bevis finds refuge at a well in which a virgin has once bathed, the virtue of whom imbues the water with a holiness that repels the dragon. Refreshing himself with the blessed water, Bevis calls upon St George as he girds himself to face the dragon once more: 'A nemenede sein Gorge, our leuedi kni3t, / And sete on his helm, þat was bri3t' (p. 129).<sup>7</sup> Bly Calkin observes that the manuscript identifies Bevis with St George, who, by the date of the compilation of the Auchinleck MS, had become established as a figure associated with England.<sup>8</sup> From the legends of his appearance

<sup>2</sup> Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138. The Auchinleck MS's 'Englishing' of the romances even goes as far as including a prologue to the two romances of French heroes (*Roland and Vernagu* and *Otuel a Knight*), which introduces their exploits but neglects to inform the reader that they are in fact French.

<sup>4</sup> Geraldine Heng, 'The romance of England: *Richard Coer de Lyon*, Saracens, Jews, and the politics of race and nation', in *The Post-Colonial Middle Ages*, ed. Cohen, pp. 135–72 (an expanded version of which is to be found in chapter 2 of Heng's *Empire of Magic*).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the national character of the Auchinleck MS, and an examination of Englishness within a number of other miscellany manuscripts, see Phillipa Hardman, 'Compiling the nation: fifteenth-century miscellany manuscripts', in *Nation, Court and Culture*, ed. Cooney, pp. 50–69.

<sup>7</sup> All references to the text of A are by page number to *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun ...*, ed. by Eugen Kölbing, EETS, ES 46, 48, 65 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. for the EETS, 1885–94) (hereafter BHK).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the literary connections between *Bevis* and the English St George legends, see Jennifer Fellows, 'St George as romance hero', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 19 (1992), 27–54.

to the Crusaders at the siege of Antioch in 1098, St George had become a popular saint in England.<sup>9</sup> Utilized as a national symbol by Edward I in Wales and Scotland during the late thirteenth century, St George's is a name with which the manuscript seeks to conjure an aura of Englishness. Bly Calkin reads this addition to the narrative in terms of her wider argument as to the text's flirtation with notions of cultural slippage.<sup>10</sup> Figuring the reference to St George as recuperative strategy by which the text seeks to minimize anxieties about hybridity, she argues that the naming of the saint represents 'an explicitly anti-Muslim corrective to Bevis's moments of assimilation into Saracen culture'.<sup>11</sup> However, the episode in which Bevis 'nemenede sein Gorge' is far removed both geographically and temporally (in terms of the romance's internal chronology) from his encounters with the Saracens, and this lack of immediacy acts to minimize such significance as may be ascribed to it. Rather, the primary function of the reference, which occurs in the direct context of Bevis's battle with the dragon near Cologne, is to associate Bevis with St George – and Englishness – in a more straightforward manner, amplifying Bevis's reputation as an English dragon-slayer: it occurs soon after a list of other famous English dragon-killers including Lancelot, Wade and Guy of Warwick.<sup>12</sup> The reference to St George thus signals A's amplification of national sentiment in the *Bevis* narrative – a process that, as we shall see, lies behind a number of the additions and variations to the story that are to be found in A.<sup>13</sup>

While *Bevis* has been identified as a romance that engages with a nascent sense of Englishness in the early fourteenth century, less attention has been paid to the complexities and apparent contradictions of the identity politics in the text. Bevis is, in many ways, a strange and unsettling example of an English knight. Comparison to a less problematic avatar of Englishness, such as Guy of Warwick, reveals Bevis's awkward position with regard to the

<sup>9</sup> See Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, p. 58, for a discussion of the developing importance of St George in England during the medieval period. The increasing popularity of St George in England is witnessed in many aspects of medieval life, from royal appropriation to church art to prayers and popular lyrics. The epithet 'Our Lady's Knight' has been described as 'the most hackneyed epithet of St George' in *The Early English Carols*, ed. by Richard Leighton Greene, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 419. On its significance, see Samantha Riches, *St George: Hero, Martyr and Myth* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), pp. 68–100; also, with specific reference to *Bevis*, Jennifer Fellows, "'Dragons two other thre": the dragon motif in some Middle English romances' (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, pp. 13–60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> BHK, pp. 122–3. One might note that Lancelot is not technically English, but in a manuscript that presents the narratives of Charlemagne's Twelve Peers as English (or at least not as French), the conflation of Arthur's foremost knight with Englishness seems perfectly understandable.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Weiss, 'The major interpolations in *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*', *Medium Ævum*, 47 (1978), 71–6 (p. 72), notes that the dragon-slaying episode is an addition to the Middle English *Bevis* tradition that is not found in the Anglo-Norman *Boeve*, and observes that we 'are reminded that it is an English knight who conquers the dragon'.

*National and Regional Identities in Sir Bevis of Hampton*

English.<sup>14</sup> Bevis, the son of an English earl, 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* thus 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.

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 marriage, his horse and his kingdom – connections which, I 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',<sup>15</sup> and such proximity brings with it risks of external contamination of one's own culture. Secondly, there is the problem of *Bevis*'s own decidedly regional origins and geographical focus. A, a version with an inherently regional narrative focus that has been co-opted by its manuscript context for a national and cosmopolitan audience,<sup>16</sup> stands as a complex manifestation of a sense of Englishness, containing an internal set of tensions between a constructed national English identity centred around 'the symbolizing potential of the king', and the powerful regional identities that were an important aspect of medieval English culture.<sup>17</sup>

In a recent reading of *Bevis* through the lens of postcolonial theory, Kofi Campbell argues: '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.'<sup>18</sup> For Campbell, *Bevis* is primarily a text that concerns itself with the delineation and the territorial expansion of

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed analysis of the role of Guy of Warwick within the identity politics of Englishness, see Robert Allen Rouse, 'An exemplary life: Guy of Warwick as medieval culture-hero', in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. by Alison Wiggins and Rosalind Field (Cambridge: Brewer, 2007), pp. 94–109, and 'Expectation vs experience: encountering the Saracen Other in Middle English romance', *SELIM*, 10 (2002), 125–40.

<sup>15</sup> 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; New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> The Auchinleck MS has been thought to have been produced in London for either a member of the merchant classes, a wealthy female reader, or a member of the crusading gentry: see Alison Wiggins, 'History and Owners' (<http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/editorial/history.html>).

<sup>17</sup> Regional identities were important and powerful in medieval England. Turville-Petre notes that 'within England there were marked regional differences, and for many purposes the country could still be divided at the Humber ... with a northern territory that had its own traditions, its great lordships with their shifting allegiances to the crown and relationships with the Scots, and where royal control was far looser than it was in the south.' (*England the Nation*, p. 7). For an extended discussion of regional identities in medieval English romance see Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, pp. 85–92.

<sup>18</sup> Kofi Campbell, 'Nation-building colonialist-style in *Bevis of Hampton*', *Exemplaria*, 18.1 (2006), 205–32 (p. 232).

Englishness. Campbell points out the theoretical commonplace that romances such as *Guy of Warwick*, *The Sowdon 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

Bly Calkin highlights medieval anxieties over the potential for cultural contamination amongst the Christian settlers of the Holy Land.<sup>21</sup> Contemporary commentators expressed concerns about the dangers of sexual intermingling, the taking-on of Eastern customs, and the degeneration of Christian morals. Citing the *Itinerarium peregrinorum*, Bly Calkin points out that such fears were often associated with the failure of the Crusades themselves: the capture of Jerusalem in 1187 was considered to be a direct consequence of the debasement and contamination of the Western Christian culture of the Crusader states.<sup>22</sup> Such admonitions, articulating the ‘fear that western Christians ... might lose their sense of proper mores and become too similar to their Muslim opponents’<sup>23</sup> through contact with the Saracen East, were common. Jean de Joinville, in his *Life of Saint Louis*, records on a number of occasions his anxieties about the dangerous influence of Eastern culture on his fellow-Christians. At the end of his account of the appearance and

<sup>19</sup> The use of the Saracen as a medieval cultural Other has become the subject of increasing critical debate: important studies include Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1977); Diane Speed, ‘The construction of the nation in medieval romance’, in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. by Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), pp. 135–57; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1999), and ‘On Saracen enjoyment’, in his *Medieval Identity Machines*, pp. 188–221.

<sup>20</sup> The two-way street of acculturation is also evident in other medieval romances. For a discussion of this phenomenon in *Havelok*, see Rouse, ‘*In his time were gode lawes: romance, law, and the Anglo-Saxon past*’, in *Cultural Encounters in Medieval English Romance*, ed. by Corinne Saunders, *Studies in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), pp. 69–83.

<sup>21</sup> The historical context of such concerns over the cultural identity of the Christian settlers in the Holy Land is addressed in Alan V. Murray, ‘Ethnic identity in the Crusader states: the Frankish race and the settlement of Outremer’, in *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Simon Forde, Lesley Johnson and Alan V. Murray, *Leeds Texts & Monographs* (Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 1995), pp. 59–74.

<sup>22</sup> Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

### *National and Regional Identities in Sir Bevis of Hampton*

customs of the Bedouin, Joinville highlights the potential risks of such cultural and theological infection: 'In our own country, since I returned from the land overseas, I have come across certain disloyal Christians who follow the Bedouin faith in holding that no man can die except on the appointed day. This belief is in effect a denial of our religion ...'.<sup>24</sup> Joinville views the potential for cultural contamination not only as a danger to those Christians in the East, but also as a feared contagion that may spread to the body of Christendom itself.

The dangers to Christians living in the East were not confined to the temptations and heresies that might be transmitted from the cultures with which they came into contact; rather, geography itself posed real and present dangers to such dislocated Westerners. Suzanne Conklin Akbari recounts the connections between national identity and geography that are drawn by Isidore of Seville: 'the physical qualities of a nation are altered by the climate its members inhabit'.<sup>25</sup> The thirteenth-century Bartholomæus Anglicus is even more insistent on the geographical and climatic effects on the character and nature of a people, arguing that 'climate is the only factor that determines the characteristics of a nation'.<sup>26</sup> To the medieval geographical mind, the most significant climatic feature is the sun, which influences the nature of man in two ways: first, the degree of exposure to the sun historically created the races of men – both the bold and hardy white-skinned men of Europe, and the cowardly sun-blackened races of Africa and the East.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the sun's heat has a more immediate influence, altering the humoral composition of those living under its influence, thus changing their behaviour and character. Geography, with the attendant climatological humoral effects upon both character and behaviour, underpins the cultural anxiety over the dangers to Western Christians of prolonged habitation of the Saracen lands of the East. When we read *Bevis* in the light of these contemporary concerns regarding the cultural integrity of transposed European Christians, episodes of apparent identity confusion are revealed as articulating anxieties about cultural hybridity, the fear that Christian English identity might be dangerously similar to that of the Saracens.

Cohen observes that 'when pagan and Christian subjectivities seem close enough almost to touch, violence erupts to redraw the faltering self/other boundary'.<sup>28</sup> One such moment of violent reaction to identity crisis is encountered during *Bevis*'s early years in Ermony. While *Bevis* is out riding with King Ermin's men, he is informed by a Saracen knight that it is Christmas, and is encouraged by the knight to follow his Christian traditions

<sup>24</sup> Jean de Joinville, 'The Life of Saint Louis', in *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. by M. R. B. Shaw (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 228.

<sup>25</sup> Suzanne Conklin Akbari, 'From due east to true north: Orientalism and orientation', in *The Post-Colonial Middle Ages*, ed. Cohen, pp. 19–34 (p. 25).

<sup>26</sup> Akbari, 'From due east to true north', p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen, 'On Saracen enjoyment', p. 205.

and honour his God as the Saracen honours his own. Despite the Saracen knight's framing of Christmas in terms of religious tolerance, the reference to the Christian holy day has an opposite effect on Bevis:<sup>29</sup>

Beues to þat Sarasin said:  
‘Of Cristendom ʒit ichaue a-braid,  
Ichaue seie on þis dai riʒt  
Armed mani a gentil kniʒt,  
Torneande riʒt in þe feld  
With helmes briʒt and mani scheld;  
And were ich also stiþ in plas,  
Ase euer Gii, me fader, was,  
Ich wolde for me lordes loue,  
þat sit hiʒ in heuene aboue,  
Fiʒte wiþ ʒow euerichon,  
Er þan ich wolde hennes gon!’ (p. 29)

Bevis associates Christmas not with the Mass or with religious observance, but with the tournaments that he remembers witnessing in his childhood. This martial remembrance stirs the boastful youth to declare that he could defeat all fifty of Ermin's knights if he had a mind to, for the love of his God. The Saracen takes offence at Bevis's boasting, and mocks him in front of the other knights, who try to teach 'þe ʒonge cristene hounde' (p. 29) a lesson. Bevis fights back and slays all fifty of them. Bevis's first violent contact with the Saracens is thus contrived through religious difference – a point that is emphasized by its setting on Christmas Day. Bevis seeks to remedy his own lack of Christian self-identity through a bloody martial baptism. Denied the community of fellow-Christians, and threatened by the seductive religious tolerance of the Saracen knight, Bevis inscribes the inviolability of his Christian identity upon the bodies of the Saracens. This performance of his Christian faith is a scene readily understandable by his English readers, and is facilitated through the only means he has available to him – violent conflict with the religious Other.

While Bevis martially reaffirms his own threatened Christian – and English – identity in the Christmas Day episode, there are other moments within the text where the self/other boundaries again threaten to dissolve. One such revealing moment of identity confusion occurs during Bevis's escape from Brademond's prison. After seven years in the dungeon, an opportunity finally arises for him to escape. Hearing him praying to Christ and Mary to grant him either death or freedom, one of his gaolers becomes enraged and enters

<sup>29</sup> In his reaction to the Saracen knight's knowledge of Christianity and its holy days, Bevis expresses an outrage that is shared by other medieval commentators such as Jean de Joinville. Far from taking comfort in a Saracen familiarity with Christian belief, this knowledge appears to Bevis as yet another instance of identity confusion, only adding to his anxieties as to the separateness of his own Christian identity.

*National and Regional Identities in Sir Bevis of Hampton*

his prison to threaten him. Bevis seizes the moment, beating the Saracen to the ground with his bare fists. However, still trapped within the twenty-foot-deep dungeon, Bevis now has to rely upon his wits, rather than his fists, to facilitate the second part of his escape. Raising his voice in an impersonation of the first of his gaolers, he successfully dupes the second by feigning that he requires aid:

For þe loue of sein Mahoun,  
Be þe rop glid bliue adoun  
And help, þat þis þef wer ded! (p. 84)

If this act of verbal impersonation is all that is required for a Christian knight to masquerade as a Saracen, then the difference between Bevis and the Saracen Other is narrow and complex indeed. Bly Calkin figures this act of ‘passing’ as a moment which ‘provoke[s] consideration about the relative permanence and veracity of an asserted identity’.<sup>30</sup> Raising questions that threaten the entire premise of the Christian desire to convert the East, Bevis’s linguistic sleight-of-hand illustrates the essentially performative nature of religious affiliation and therefore cultural identity. If this similarity does, as Campbell suggests, play a part in the rhetoric of the possibility of conversion of the Saracens, it must also be kept in mind that Saracens are not the only objects of the conversionary impulse. Accounts of the Crusades are littered with examples of the forced (or otherwise) conversion of Christians to Islam, and in Bevis’s vocal duping of his prison guards through the invocation of the Saracen deity we can perhaps see alluded to, in the comic safety of the romance genre, a cultural anxiety regarding the two-way street of conversion in the Middle East.

While Campbell sees Bevis’s interactions with Saracen culture, and his flirtations with Saracen identity, as exemplifying the ‘colonialist desire of the text’,<sup>31</sup> in that his cultural hybridity is the vehicle for the expansion of English control over the lands that Bevis and his sons conquer and convert, we must also recognize that such colonial endeavours take a toll on the colonizers themselves. Bly 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’.<sup>32</sup> 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 problematic

<sup>30</sup> Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Campbell, ‘Nation-building colonialist-style’, p. 229.

<sup>32</sup> Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, p. 85.



aspect of national identity in the romance. The homogeneity of Englishness is also at issue within the bounds of England itself. Like other Matter of England romances, *Bevis* is intimately connected with its own regional locale; as Crane comments, 'the place of national spirit in the romance is uneasy'.<sup>33</sup> *Bevis*, a narrative with an avowedly regional focus, 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 the 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.<sup>34</sup> While English 'historical' romances such as *Bevis* and *Guy of Warwick* participate in the telling of a history of England, they are also regional narratives, closely connected with their settings and the origins of their protagonists. 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 Lazamon, to name but three.<sup>35</sup> The existence of regional voices in these texts raises the question of whether Englishness in *Bevis* is constructed as a homogeneous whole, or whether regional tensions lurk within. *Bevis*'s sobriquet 'of Hampton', I would suggest, signals a powerful regional discourse that runs through much of this romance – one that manifests itself in *Bevis*'s repeated conflicts with centralized royal authority in the form of King Edgar.

In making her case for the possibility of medieval national identities, Heng argues that medieval nationalism is not the same as its modern counterpart:

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.<sup>36</sup>

In her analysis of *Richard Coer de Lyon*, she argues that the figure of the king occupies a centrally symbolic place within the articulation of the medieval English nation. 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

<sup>33</sup> Crane, *Insular Romance*, p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> Rosalind Field, 'Romance in England', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 152–76 (p. 162).

<sup>35</sup> Michelle Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Heng, 'The romance of England', p. 139.

### *National and Regional Identities in Sir Bevis of Hampton*

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*.

These regional concerns are most clearly articulated near the end of the romance, in an episode that does not occur in *Bevis's* Anglo-Norman source.<sup>37</sup> After his return from exile to restore his foster-father Saber's heir, Robaunt, to his lands in Hampshire, Bevis is involved in a street battle against the inhabitants of London. As the conflict rages, Bevis is confronted by a particularly fierce Londoner:

Par was a Lombard in þe toun,  
Pat was scherewed & feloun;  
He armede him in yrene wede  
And lep vpon a sterne stede  
And rod forþ wiþ gret randoun  
And þouȝte haue slawe sire Beuoun. (p. 211)

Lombards were a particularly visible alien community in London during this period (Lombard Street had an Italian community of long standing), and ill-feeling and violence towards foreigners were common: from the Flemish merchants murdered in the riots of 1381 to the riots against the presence of aliens (especially Italians and Lombards) in 1456 and 1457, there were frequent outbursts of anti-foreign sentiment.<sup>38</sup> London is here constructed as a cosmopolitan, immigrant city, full of the kinds of foreigners that are dangerous to Bevis and to his regional Englishness. Despite the memorable figure of the Lombard, London's alterity is in fact downplayed to a degree in A by comparison to the version of the romance represented by the printed texts and, in part, by Manchester, Chetham's Library, MS 8009. As Derek Pearsall notes, in this version (hereafter P), 'the London opposition to Bevis is dominated by Lombards from the start'.<sup>39</sup> In P, Bevis first defeats the treacherous steward, and then is immediately beset not by one, but by 'meny Lumbardis'.<sup>40</sup>

Not only is London represented as being even more alien in P; there is also

<sup>37</sup> Weiss, 'The major interpolations', p. 73, notes: 'though the English writer could not change these final details, he played down the conquest of Monbrant, and added a dramatic last fight in the city of London'.

<sup>38</sup> Claire Sponsler, 'Alien nation: London's aliens and Lydgate's mummings for the mercers and goldsmiths', in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Cohen, pp. 229–42 (pp. 230–1).

<sup>39</sup> Derek Pearsall, 'Strangers in late-fourteenth-century London', in *The Stranger in Medieval Society*, ed. by F. R. P. Akehurst and Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 46–62 (p. 53).

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer L. Fellows, 'Sir Beves of Hampton: Study and Edition', 5 vols (unpub. Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Cambridge, 1980) (hereafter BHF), IV, 4102.

another tension, absent from A, evident within P's construction of English identity. In A, Edgar's troublesome steward is presented as a stereotypical romance steward, envious of Bevis's fame and corrupt in his use of his position. However, in P there is further evidence of his perfidious character: here he is not simply 'þe stiward of þe halle ... þe worste frend of alle' (p. 203), as in A, but is named as Sir Brian of Cornwall.<sup>41</sup> P here makes use of a well-established geographically internal Other in its characterization of Bevis's foe.<sup>42</sup>

The anxiety regarding London and its inhabitants that is apparent in Bevis has provoked a number of interpretations. Crane has argued that the text manifests concerns regarding the relationship between the Crown and the barony;<sup>43</sup> while Pearsall has observed that it seems 'almost as if the translator became aware that he needed to "alienize" this native opposition to an English hero'.<sup>44</sup> However, I would suggest another reading, in which the emphasis is placed upon the contrast between Bevis, as provincial English, and the cosmopolitan, non-English nature of London. In terms of English identity, the figure of the Lombard looms large, characterizing London as being not at the centre of Englishness, but at the margins. *Bevis* seems to exhibit a communal anxiety regarding the increasing influence of London's immigrant populace over affairs of state, and of the very identity of the city. London, as the locus of royal power and as a major point of contact with the foreign, is constructed in the regional discourse of this romance as a site of both the contestation and the contamination of English identity. The social discourse that underlies this anxiety is perhaps difficult to ascertain, although one might point out the increasing centralization of the royal court, as well as the numbers of foreign aliens during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as likely sources of apprehensiveness. This concern about the relationship of London to English identity, as strong today as it seems to be in *Bevis*, conveys a powerful criticism of the capital as unrepresentative of England and the English.<sup>45</sup>

However, the romance does not leave this apparent fracture in its fantasy of Englishness unaddressed. After the London episode, Edgar and Bevis (nation and region) are reconciled, and the king offers Bevis's son Miles the hand of his daughter in marriage, making him his heir.<sup>46</sup> This merging of Bevis's family with that of the royal house of England, seen by Campbell as

<sup>41</sup> Brian seems in part to be motivated by professional jealousy in his enmity towards Bevis, as he once held the offices that Bevis now holds: see BHF, III, 3175–6, quoted p. 96 above.

<sup>42</sup> On the role of the Cornish as an Insular Other for the English, see Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 85–8. Numerous Cornish knights demonstrate their innate treachery in medieval English romances, including Medyok, the lord 'of al Cornewaile' in *Guy of Warwick*, Godrich the earl of Cornwall in *Havelok*, and, of course, the Arthurian figure of King Mark.

<sup>43</sup> Crane, *Insular Romance*, p. 218.

<sup>44</sup> Pearsall, 'Strangers in late-fourteenth-century London', p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> A concern that is echoed in the London populace's frequent outbursts of violence against the alien communities: cf. Sponsler, 'Alien nation', pp. 230–1.

<sup>46</sup> BHK, p. 215.

### *National and Regional Identities in Sir Bevis of Hampton*

‘uniting under a single name’ England and Bevis’s conquests in the East,<sup>47</sup> attempts within A to reconcile Bevis’s family – and vicariously the audience – with the *communitas regni* of the English nation. Interestingly, this union of the regional and the national takes place not in London – the symbolic location of centralized royal English power thus far in the narrative – but in Nottingham.<sup>48</sup> No rationale for this is given in the text, and we are left to speculate as to A’s variation from other versions of *Bevis*, where the wedding takes place in London. Perhaps in the location of the marriage in Nottingham we might read the return of royal ceremony and power to the regional stage.

Again we can see the Auchinleck narrative as being particularly concerned with a *rapprochement* between the regional and national discourses within the text. It is notable that while A clearly states that Miles becomes Edgar’s heir, not all versions of *Bevis* do so. P recounts a different version of the marriage, holding it in London and making no mention of Miles being in line to inherit the crown (perhaps assuming that Edgar’s daughter is not next in line to the throne) but instead giving him the earldom of Cornwall;<sup>49</sup> it also, like all the versions of the narrative *except* A, places the wedding in London, maintaining the royal privilege of the chief city of the English kings.

*Bevis* illustrates the inherent distrust in regional discourse towards the centralized royal and bureaucratic power that is characterized by cosmopolitan London. It demonstrates a questioning of the cultural and national centre – a characteristic element of regional voices both within the medieval period and outside it. The concern with the foreign nature of London in *Bevis* suggests a questioning of the nature of Englishness that is as important as the development of Englishness itself. In *Bevis* we find an imagined England constructed as a space in which tensions between competing regional discourses of identity can be played out in a simplified and secure past, rather than in the complex everyday world of the audience; for if the Anglo-Saxon English, despite the regional tensions that are evident in the romance narratives of the pre-Conquest past, could operate within a wider English national identity, then the rural and the urban, the regional and the central, could all see a way of identifying with an inclusive national fantasy of Englishness.

Bevis dies and is buried far from England, in his newly won kingdom of Mombraunt. His burial signifies none of the unambiguously colonial conflation of the heroic and the national body that we might expect from Campbell’s reading of the romance. Rather, Bevis’s death and burial in the exotic East act only to reinforce his own troublesome relation to English identity. Bevis may well have converted Mombraunt by the sword but, as was all too evident to *Bevis*’s fourteenth-century audience, such conquests had proved transitory

<sup>47</sup> Campbell, ‘Nation-building colonialist-style’, p. 229.

<sup>48</sup> BHK, p. 215.

<sup>49</sup> BHF, III, 4171–2.

*Robert Allen Rouse*

and were already part of a vanishing legacy of European conquest within the Saracen world. Bevis's death, and the troublesome hybrid nature of his identity during his life, 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 Middle English romances such as *Bevis* the monolithic homogeneity that we have come to expect from the forms of nationalism prevalent in the modern age.