

“‘A Sin That Could Not Be Named’: Cannibalism as Christian Symbolism in the Medieval  
Imagination and Romances.”

“Latin, the language of Western European Christendom in the eleventh century, did not originally have a word for ‘cannibal’ and needed to be furnished with one by the Greek: Literally a sin that could not be named.”

—Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*.

Richard I of England, otherwise known as Richard Coeur de Lion or Richard the Lionheart, was the king of England from 1189 CE until 1199 CE. His short reign was punctuated by a momentous, even fantastical, reputation in which Richard was a skilled but controversial military soldier, king, and dedicated Christian. The written historical records on Richard, including *Richard Coeur de Lion*, a manuscript-length poem penned anonymously circa 1300 CE, details his reign and his involvement in the Third Crusade of the Christian European empire’s attempt to occupy Jerusalem. The poem weaves fantastical elements with history, creating an fictious tale filled with chivalry and adventure. However, one pivotal scene turns Richard from an ordinary king-solider to that of a happy cannibal: Richard, during the crusades, requests pork as a cure for an illness that has befallen him, but instead receives the flesh of a Saracen without his knowledge as no pork was available. Upon learning of his cannibalism, Richard is not horrified by this reveal, but rather he rejoices in it<sup>1</sup>. As translated by Katherine H. Terrell<sup>2</sup>, I situate the historical poem itself in my argument as the primary evidence for

---

<sup>1</sup> “The King...began to laugh as if he were mad. / What, is Saracens’ flesh this good, / And I never knew it until now” (3214-3217).

<sup>2</sup> Published in 2019. Katherine H. Terrell is a Professor of Literature who specializes in Middle English literatures.

cannibalism as Christian symbolism both in the medieval imagination and romance through examination of the scene and through engaging with the literary and historical context of the crusades. My argument builds upon the claims made by Geraldine Heng regarding crusader cannibalism in her work *Empire of Magic* (2003). Cannibalism, though unarguably a body horror centralized in physical and psychological trauma, is a defining characteristic of Medieval romance as it engages with romance's themes of bound identity, ritual, and nationhood. While Heng defines cannibalism as crucial to the romance genre, I argue that it is not only crucial but that it is the defining symbolism of the romance genre as it not only represents romance's crucial elements of bound identity, ritual, and nationhood, but that it unites them.

The Third Crusade brought famine—hunger, which holds important context in religion, literature, and histories both real and imagined—to Richard's army. The trauma of the Crusades, in historical record, "attributes crusader cannibalism to excessive hunger" (Blurton 115). But instead of famine, Richard's hunger and first cannibalism finds its roots in sickness. His sickness, in part, is blamed on "food and drink that he found there, / Which was not wholesome for his body" (3046-3047). The otherness of the food of the Middle East, in comparison to England, is, for Richard, so unsuitable and unholy that it makes him ill. While not explicitly stated, the implication is that it is the difference in religions that causes the food to be unsuitable and thus indigestible for Richard; his Christian consumption in England kept him strong. Richard's soldiers in their concern for their King's health prayed to God for his recovery. Richard eventually emerges from his fever, but without an appetite; he hungered "not for wine, nor water, nor any liquor, / But he longed for pork" (3070-3071). While certain Abrahamic religions, such as Islam and Judaism, forbid the consumption of pork as they consider it unclean, Christianity does not. Pork is, as all animal flesh is, considered made clean by God. It is this religious divide

that leads to a lack of pork being available for consumption. One of Richard's knights commands the army's steward to make a meal out of a "Saracen young and fat" so that it might resemble pork and "through God's might" heal Richard so long as he knows nothing of the truth of his consumption (3088, 3101). The meal presented to Richard is proclaimed as being procured "through God's grace" and Richard consumes it happily, never once questioning the taste or the act of consumption he engages in (3108). After this consumption, Richard regains his strength and even goes on to thank Jesus for his return to health. However, the narrative quickly changes when Richard demands to see the head of the pig he consumed and his soldiers, fearing to lie to him once more, bring him instead the head of the Saracen child they slew. Instead of appropriate horror, Richard delights in the discovery of cannibalism, even attributing it to "God's death and his resurrection" as he and his soldiers "shall never die for hunger" so long as there are Saracens they can consume (3219-3220). Here, Richard's consumption is made akin to Jesus's salvation.

Richard's appetite for pork and his soldiers' need to appease their leader amplifies the second hunger in Richard—one for power and domination. The Crusade, to a man like Richard whose religious beliefs are rooted in colonialism and who holds an active disdain for other religions, implicates power—even power ascertained by harmful, taboo acts—as necessary for carrying out "God's plans." Richard perceives his act of cannibalism as akin to divinity; it was, after all, an act of God that he was returned to health and God acted through the Saracen flesh he consumed. This consumption becomes a new weapon Richard did not previously consider in his battle against the Saracens. By weaponizing cannibalism, Richard declares it as a violence of for the sake of nationhood rather than a violence born out of famine and desperation. Shortly after Richard's return to health, he arranges a meeting with Saracen leaders, asking them to dine with

him, to discuss a release of Saracen prisoners Richard held<sup>3</sup>. He then commands his marshal to slay, cook, and serve the heads of the imprisoned Saracens. The Saracens react in grief and horror upon being presented with the cooked heads, refusing to eat as they grieved their lost friends, while Richard “ate with a good heart,” now knowingly and willingly engaging in cannibalism<sup>4</sup>. The Saracens refer to Richard as “the devil’s brother” while Richard declares himself a “true Christian King,” seemingly mocking their horror and reaffirming that his soldiers will not starve so long as there are Saracens to consume (3484, 3514). Though Richard never explicitly declares his action as a Christian one, his willingness to forgo the taboo to situate his army as a dominating force in the historically Christian Crusade marks the action as embedded in Christian symbolism. Richard in this act of willful cannibalism steps outside of his humanity, turning himself into a devil or monster. This otherness separates himself from God and from his humanity while dually serving as a righteous act in the overarching righteous crusade. Richard’s cannibalism, the first and second, transforms the Christian ritual of consumption into national power, additionally transforming Richard into “Christian and national hero” (Elias 3).

The Christian act of consumption of the “body and blood of Christ” through grain and wine invokes symbolic cannibalism as means to achieving unity with Christ as “eating God would set one along the path of divinity” (Heng 26). This ritualistic act is a “cornerstone of Eucharistic theology,” one which Richard most certainly draws upon in his own willful, second act of cannibalistic consumption (Heng 26). Richard places Saracen flesh even above the flesh of Christ as he declares “there is no flesh as nourishing / For an English Christian man” as Saracen flesh, inviting the implication that Saracen could, or does, replace the flesh of Christ in ritual

---

<sup>3</sup> “But, for your love, I pray you / To stay and dine with me” (3404-3405).

<sup>4</sup> “Therefore [the Saracens] had every grief! / When they saw who [the heads] were, / The tears ran out of their eyes; / And when they read the letters, / They feared to be cruelly slain” (3464-3468).

(3548-3549). In the same fashion that the blood and flesh of Christ gives strength to Christian peoples, so too does Saracen flesh for Richard and his Christian soldiers turning an act of consumption, one that is rooted in taboo, into a ritualistic act of war. Ritualistic cannibalism glorifies the taboo act and skews the otherwise controversial cultural-religious implications of it. Instead of a horrific act, it becomes a necessary symbolism. If Richard had rejected cannibalism, he would have failed to make himself into something of a myth—being that he was willing to forgo taboos, culture, and body trauma in order to position himself in a higher rank of power within the dynamics of the crusade. Feasting on the Saracens in front of their own people proved him to be a monster too treacherous to fight which is, likely, what Richard was aiming to achieve in the act. Additionally, with his separation from humanity, he makes himself into a sacred figure akin to Jesus. The sacrifices he makes for what he perceives to be the good of his people—English Christians—aligns him with the mythos of acting in otherworldly ways to achieve a desired outcome. The idea of a “sacred cannibalism” through consumption of the body and blood of Christ “created and bound the identity of the individual Christian to a symbolic community” similarly to the way in which the Crusades aided in creating a united, Christian nationhood (Heng 26). Richard symbolically overlays these difference facets of nationhood, bound identity, and ritual in his forbidden consumption. The second cannibalism of Saracen flesh is a power play to establish political and physical dominance over the Saracens. Richard’s actions, while rooted in religious overtones, are also explicitly in the name of establishing a nationhood for his people (here being that religion and nation were not so separated to someone like Richard). However, the act dually embodies the ritual of the Eucharistic consumption and though Richard’s own soldiers are also horrified by Richard’s joy and later continuation of this taboo consumption, the act establishes the lengths Richard is willing to go to achieve Christian dominion. The Crusades

were a matter of control and domination; the cannibalism symbolizes the same working action of control and domination through “the acquisition of divine power and status through union with the godhead” (Heng 31). It is not without reason to think that Richard may have perceived himself as a Godly figure given the divine right of kings and his dialogue throughout the poem in which he continuously declares that his actions are either acts of God directly or facilitated by God. Every hunger and consequent consumption are endeavors that unite Richard with the God for which he is waging the crusade.

The “blood and Flesh of Christ” enables one to become “sacred,” instigating the myth of divinity in consumption and is further calcified when one explicitly consumes actual blood and flesh in the name of Christ. (Heng 26). Historically, Richard lived, crusaded, and died in a time during which it was believed that ruling power was ordained by God—it was a birthright and a divine one. Richard’s rule, then, is entangled in divinity and even inseparable from it insofar that people would have believed Richard to hold some divinity in his own body and soul simply because of his lineage and title. It is not unlikely that Richard saw himself as a representative of his God and perhaps he saw any act of which he was willing to commit for the sake of the crusade as necessary for the security of his religion as the dominant one even if such acts included sinful ones. Additionally, Heng points out that “Medieval Christians inhabited a world, moreover, in which eating was overlaid with sacramental, ritual, and symbolic significance” making Richard no stranger to the associations between eating and ritual (Heng 26). By the Third Crusade, famine was not a stranger to the Christian soldiers; though little evidence points to cannibalism as being a planned solution to famine that Richard had been considering, as we see when Richard is surprised to learn the truth of his first cannibalism, Richard was likely aware of the sacrifices he’d have to make in order to establish security for his cause and to establish

reputation as both a good Christian and a good king during his time participating in the Crusade. Such arguable sacrifices that Richard make on behalf of his reputation as a Christian King, in attempts to flourish as both, include leaving his home nation of England, enduring famine, and witnessing the trauma of the crusade. The act of cannibalism itself is also a sacrifice that Richard makes, the first time unwillingly and the second time willingly, as it is “something that one cannot engage in and remain fully human” (Terrell 17). Furthermore, his fellow soldiers and Christians alike would have recognized this loss of humanity in Richard as “cannibalism to the medieval Christian was that dehumanizing, monstrous condition which canceled out the coordinates of recognizably human identity” (Heng 29). By dehumanizing himself for the sake of securing Jerusalem as the rightful holy land for his Christian peoples, he recasts himself not as a Christian King but nearly a martyr willing to do whatever it takes for his cause. In this sense, he makes himself sacred in order to do what others will not, alluding to the last consumption of Christ in which he symbolically offered his blood and flesh to his disciples. It is perhaps not out of the realm of reason that Richard perceived his own flesh as divine after his consumption of the Saracens; being that he was willing to offer himself for the sake of God, his very self becomes part of the Godhead—an idea that only builds upon the foundation of the divinity of rule. Additionally, his birthright divinity gives him a sense of immunity from the consequences, be them physical or spiritual, of sinful or taboo acts such as cannibalism. Godhood, like kingship, comes with certain privileges. The very moment that Richard learns the truth of the flesh he consumed, his thoughts “immediately [skip] from the healing properties of Saracen flesh to its strategic possibilities” (Blurton 126). However, Richard is the only character throughout the narrative of *Richard Coeur de Lion* that participates in cannibalism, a fact that distinguishes him

from the other characters similarly to the way that his kingdom does. It is the language used in regard to the cannibalism that distinguishes him as well.

Cannibalism according to Heng's investigation of literary translations of the word itself is "a sin that could not be named" as the Latin that Richard spoke held no word for such an act (Heng 26). Instead, the Latin Christian kingdom resorted to using Greek for the concept; Heng makes no mention of the specific word used, but the Greek "Androphagi" ("man-eaters")<sup>5</sup> or "Omophagia" (which refers to eating flesh in ritual)<sup>6</sup> are possible options. The implication that the act of consumption of human flesh was so treacherous, or perhaps even unthinkable, that the Romans, and various subsequent populations after-the-fact, did not put it into language indicates the level of severity with which cannibalism was regarded. Even the Saracens struggled with language after Richard's act of cannibalism, referring to him instead as a devil, a monster, or with other undesirable labels. The struggle for identifying language for both cannibalism itself and those who participate in cannibalism is a telling sign for the horrors implicated in the act. Richard, however, is unconcerned with the language encompassing his cannibalism; he does not refer to himself as a devil or a monster and he refers to his cannibalism as nothing more than eating a meal with the causality that one might refer to consuming wine or pork. The cultural act of eating, throughout countless nations both past and present, is one that often invites community and fellowship between peoples. Richard is aware of this when he invites the Saracens to dine with him, even referring to the Saracens that he invites as "friends" and engaging with them in a "companionable" manner (3444-3445). Before the reveal of Richard's cannibalism, the language is

---

<sup>5</sup> For further reading: The Androphagi, a Scythian tribe once located in present-day Iran, is discussed in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 3, part 1: "The Prehistory of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Aegean World."

<sup>6</sup> Omophagia is defined in English as the eating of raw food. It originates from the Koine Greek word for "raw": ομός. Omophagy has ancient roots in worship and ritual of the Greek God Dionysus who represents winemaking, ritual madness, and more.



clear: meals are presented as “courses,” salt is set out (though bread and wine are withheld), and Richard urges the Saracens to “eat vigorously” (3493). When Richard orders the platters of Saracen heads to be taken away and other food to be presented, “venison, cranes, and good roasts, / Wine, claret, and pleasant drinks” are all laid out on the dining table. The just way of dining is therefore restored and so is the language. The abundance of names, of language, indicates the discord between consuming wine, fruit, and meat that is typical and consuming human flesh that is atypical. Here, I consider again the act of consumption in the Eucharist. It is consumption that signifies a bound identity between members of a religion, region, or populace. Despite differences, those that participate in Eucharist are united by way of consuming the blood and body of Christ. Religion and nationhood, similar to consumption, create a bound identity between people. The Saracens are bound together in their rejection and horror of Richard’s cannibalism and Richard is bound together with God in his acceptance and consumption of Saracen flesh. However, Richard’s cannibalism complicates the concept of bound identity when he separates himself from his fellow Christians by engaging in the perceived sinful act of consuming human flesh. He “others” himself in the sense that “the violent barbarism of Richard’s act appropriates the key quality of monstrosity” (Blurton 124). This act of non-human identity is foreshadowed early in the narrative as, after Richard consumes the heart of a lion, he is declared a “devil, and no man” (1112). It has always been in Richard’s violent, determined nature to push the boundaries of humanity at whatever cost. While he nuances the notion of bound identity, he reinforces the sociocultural implications of eating and the bound identity(s) that eating can create when it is determined as socially and culturally appropriate. It is cannibalism, for Richard and in the overarching examination of romance, that unites bound

identity, ritual, and nationhood into the cohesive tapestry that is the implications and goals of romance literature in imagined history(s).

While Richard's cannibalism is likely fictitious, it remains nonetheless ingrained in historic memory. King Richard I of England's historical legacy is preserved in memory through historical records, cultural and religious effects, and by the literary legacy of the *Richard Coeur de Lion* narrative. Undoubtedly, regardless of the truth of the narrative, fictitious, imagined history shapes nations and cultures just as well as true history as we see today in the continuing trauma of current events that mirror those that occurred in the Middle Ages. However, what remains at the heart of record in literate societies past and present is narratives, such as those like *Richard Coeur de Lion*, that weave fiction with fact. Though the act of cannibalism itself is rooted in historical trauma, the symbolism it holds regarding bound identity, ritual, and nationhood engineers it to be a powerful tool which with to investigate Medieval romance narratives, as seen through *Richard Coeur de Lion*. The situation of cannibalism as the imperative romantic thread is one that could additionally be examined in relation to creation origin/myth, imagined histories, and fabulist elements of literature. Cannibalism, in its literary usage(s), is the culmination of Medieval romance symbolisms and themes, concreting its position of importance in the dialogue and criticism surrounding Medieval romance narratives.

WORKS CITED

Blurton, Heather. *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature*. "The Flesch of a Sarazeyn:

Cannibalism, Genre, and Nationalism." Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 105-131.

Elias, Marcel. "Violence, Excess, and the Composite Emotional Rhetoric of Richard Coeur de

Lion." *Studies in Philology*, U of NC Press, vol. 114, no. 1, Winter 2017, pp. 1-38.

Heng, Geraldine. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*.

Columbia UP, 2003.

*Richard Coeur de Lion*. Edited and translated by Katherine H. Terrell, Broadview Editions, 2019.