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Vanessa Jaeger
Binghamton University SUNY, U.S.

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Eating Up the Enemy: Teaching *Richard Coer de Lyon* and the Misrepresentation of Crusader Ideology in White Nationalist Agendas

Vanessa Jaeger
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Abstract

American white nationalist groups, such as the Klu Klux Klan, the American Freedom Party, and the American Nazi Party, capitalize on the fantasy of a white, heteronormative medieval Europe in their anti-Islam agendas, misrepresenting both the history of the Crusades and the "Pork-Eating Crusader" image associated with it. Now a product available for purchase at certain online retail shops, the image of a crusader eating "pork" appears in the popular medieval romance *Richard Coer de Lyon (RCL)* when an ailing King Richard unwittingly eats a Saracen captive instead of the pork he requested. This article examines how working with students to trace the history of this image through *RCL* gives needed context to the racial and religious identities represented in Crusader texts. When properly contextualized, the episodes of Richard cannibalizing his Saracen enemies demonstrate that the infamous king is a figure for modern audiences to question rather than to emulate. By teaching students that medieval racial and religious identities were in flux, they are better able to see how the modern fantasy of the medieval period is used by white nationalist activists and how to combat their agendas. Such lessons further articulate how certain positions, like race, gender, and religion are constructed over time, and, more importantly, how they continue to be constructed and changed.

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Teaching over the past decade, the demand for medieval culture in new media has experienced a sharp increase. From the *Game of Thrones* franchise to the resurgence of the role-playing game (RPG) Dungeons and Dragons, to the popularity of RPG video games like *Skyrim*, products inspired by the medieval period demonstrate its lasting popularity. The prominence of such products affects conceptions of European medieval culture, framing the period as one in which dragons abound and knights brutalize each other through constant warfare and competition. Often, students unfamiliar with the medieval period are unaware that these so-called 'Dark Ages' actually saw the growth of modern vernacular languages and the development of intricate political structures. The historical and cultural complexity of the Middle Ages becomes morphed and misrepresented by our modern medieval fantasies, particularly as it pertains to the gender and racial politics of the time.[1] Conceptions of race and gender from the medieval period do not translate directly across time and space, and teaching students to disassociate *their* conceptions from those of the medieval world they study becomes an important part of the work that medievalist educators perform. Scholars of the medieval period, however, cannot control the pervasiveness of the modern medieval fantasy or how frequently it is reconstructed and reimagined by certain ever-evolving industries, like Hollywood, or how it is interpreted and represented by users of social media platforms like Twitter and Reddit. Misrepresentation becomes more troubling when certain groups use medieval culture as a historical justification for racial inequality.

This article explores the current trend of American white nationalist groups, such as the Klu Klux Klan, the American Freedom Party, and the American Nazi Party, to shape their platform with Crusader ideology by using these medieval symbols and iconography to defend their messages of hate and bigotry against non-white groups. Such images allow these groups to imagine that they carry on the work of their crusading forefathers, defending other white Americans against 'Saracen hordes' while simultaneously imagining the Crusades as the dominant history of the medieval period. By framing their message in such a manner, white nationalist groups create the impression that the current wars white Americans fight in the Middle East are a continuation of the wars white people have always fought and will always fight there. Soldiers fighting overseas in the Middle East display "Pork-Eating Crusader" patches they purchased online, potentially unaware of the history that this iconography carries. By working with students to trace the history of the "Pork-Eating Crusader" through the medieval romance *Richard Coer de Lyon* (*RCL*), educators give proper context to the racial and religious differences represented in medieval Crusader texts. Centering this context teaches students to recognize that the misrepresentation of medieval Crusader iconography and ideology allows certain groups to imagine a perpetual West versus East binary of difference that justifies violence.

For many Americans, the recent attack on the U. S. Capitol Building was a visual confirmation that political and ideological divisions across the country had officially reached a new level of tension and violence. Those of us watching at home were likely not surprised by the number of Confederate and Gadsden flags[2] being waved emphatically by the mob, having become accustomed to the mobilization of these symbols for 'patriotic' purposes. Other images, however, surely puzzled some viewers. Why were so many people wearing large red crosses and crying *Deus Vult*? Why was there a vibrantly painted Viking posing in the Senate chambers? For many who do not identify as members of these white nationalist groups, the iconography appears random—even confusing—particularly in the case of the Viking whose image was splashed across most media outlets.[3] However, through the guise of Crusader and Viking gear, as well as various other symbols, these protesters can embody and perform as their white European ancestors, who they assume shared their commitment to suppressing non-white communities. Unlike the Confederate and Gadsden flags though, such images have very little connection to U. S. history, instead having roots in the much earlier European medieval period—a realization that may prompt the simple question: then why use them?

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[1] The issue of medievalism and popular culture has increasingly plagued the modern medievalist and resulted in intense consideration for the effect that movies, video games, television, and other media have had on perpetuation of a fantasy of medieval conceptions of race, gender, and religious identities. For more information about this issue please consult Elliot, Haydock, Higgin, and Young.

A fascination with medieval texts and imagery is hardly a new phenomenon. Victorians prided themselves on their English connection to Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, producing art and literature inspired by the Arthurian legends.[4] Nazi propaganda frequently utilized Viking iconography in hopes that such images would inspire nationalistic pride.[5] It hardly seems surprising that current nationalist groups would engage with similar tactics through their uses of medieval imagery, particularly those associated with the Crusades. From neo-Nazi groups and bloggers who name themselves after 8th-century Frankish king and Crusader Charles Martel, to memes of former President Donald Trump dressed in iconic Crusader garb, to the use of the Crusader war-cry, *Deus Vult* ('God wills it'), as a Twitter hashtag**,** Crusade imagery has appeared more and more frequently since the September 11th attacks.[6] Medieval scholar and dominant voice against the use of medieval iconography by alt-right groups, Dorothy Kim, observes that white supremacists imagine medieval Europe as the last bastion of historical white homogeneity, which she believes to be the reason why they engage with this specific historical period. For members of white nationalist groups, the use of medieval iconography aligns their message with a period of white history. Moreover, they deploy language that describes their fight as a "crusade," echoing language used by former President George W. Bush in the aftermath of 9/11 and imagining themselves "citizens of the crusader coalition" (Jones). Steve Bannon's 2018 interview with Israeli news outlet, *Haaretz*, even frames tensions in the Middle East as a continuation of the enduring battle of Christians versus Muslims, citing Charles Martel's success against Muslim forces in 743 and the failed attempts of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in 1529 to capture Vienna as pivotal moments in the fight against radical Islam (Taub). When white nationalist groups construct a fantasy of an exclusively white Europe with Crusader ideology, they create a history shaped by a perpetual struggle between West and East that pits white people against non-white, non-heteronormative, non-Christian communities. Such an imagined history assumes two things: Firstly, that race operated then as it does now, meaning that white Europeans constructed power on a scale influenced by skin pigmentation. Secondly, that Europe was a racially homogenous landscape, devoid of the current ethnic diversity we know exists now. These assumptions produce only one global story of race and power—a narrative that ignores how time and history transform cultural conceptions and, more importantly, a narrative that medieval educators must fight against in their classrooms if they intend to produce students prepared to challenge structures of power.

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[2] The Gadsden flag is a yellow flag with coiled rattlesnake that reads "Dont Tread on Me." First appearing during the American Revolution, the flag was used by the Continental Marines as a motto flag. Since its inception in American culture, the flag has remained a symbol of freedom and support for the American military. More recently, the Gadsden flag has become a symbol for far-right groups, including the Tea Party and the Klu Klux Klan. For more information about the evolution of the flag's symbolism, consult Walker.

[3] The adoption of Viking imagery has a long history of being connected to extremist groups. Current groups align themselves with Vikings with the fantasy that they lived in completely white, isolated communities. Moreover, they see the images created by popular culture that frame Vikings as purely violent conquerors who easily decimated and dominated local groups in raids. Such fantasies romanticize Vikings in a manner that revises history and reduces the complexity of their culture. Alt-right and extremist groups justify their own violence against and hate for non-white groups by imagining they participate in the same battles as the Vikings whose history they have revised. For more information about the issue of medievalism, popular culture, and Vikings please consult the following: Cooper; Kim; Matteis; Perry; Steel.

[4] For more information on King Arthur's influence on Victorian culture, the following texts offer a broad strokes overview, including literature, art, and history: Bryden; Mancoff. The Camelot Project, an online open-access resource published by the University of Rochester's Robbins Library, likewise offers access to texts, images, and projects for educational purposes.

[5] For more information on Norse and Viking influence on Nazi ideologies and propaganda, consult the online, open-access resource by Neher.

[6] For more information about the goals and messages associated with some of these groups, consult the *Occidental Quarterly*, a journal founded in 2001 by William H. Regnery that publishes works dedicated to the philosophy that white people have become a minority, or *The Crusader*, a publication from the extremist group the *Klu Klux Klan*. Many other images and references to Crusader ideology can be easily accessed through Twitter, Reddit, or other social media platforms.

Medieval scholars have done important work on medieval conceptions of race over the years, especially in the wake of postcolonial scholarship and the discourse it has inspired. While postcolonial scholars shape conversations of the racial and gender politics that haunt colonized landscapes, their conversations cannot translate to a precolonial world. As Robert Bartlett makes clear in his work on the evolution of Europe as a hegemonic space, race was not conceived of or defined as a biological marker of difference. For medieval peoples, difference was not necessarily written on the skin (197). Bartlett observes, "while the language of race is biological…its medieval reality was almost entirely cultural" (197). Medieval communities saw race as the combination of language, law, power, blood, and most importantly, cultural practices and habits (197-98). Race, then, functioned as an overlapping of multiple categories of difference rather than that of skin pigmentation; of these, religion was the major contributor to medieval conceptions of otherness. Darker skin often signified a non-Christian person, placing religion as the first marker of difference that a medieval person would see.

Moreover, thanks to extensive trade and a determinedly mobile populace, Europe was a diverse space. White populations of Latin Christendom were not so isolated that they never interacted with people outside of their communities. Indeed, Bartlett observes that in urban spaces particularly, the "population was an immigrant population," which "was true everywhere" (233). Janet Lippman Abu-Lughod further suggests that, while the transportation of goods that we see in our current global economy did exist during the Middle Ages, the ease with which such products were moved did not (76-77). The inability to conduct cross-continental trade easily meant that small trading posts, positioned relatively close together, were required in order to move commodities across landscapes. Cooperation between people and places became a necessity for successful trade routes and also meant that diverse groups of people were constantly interacting (75-101). Europe was a diverse landscape of moving people—with as much internal as external conflict that informed how communities perceived otherness, as evidenced by the Hundred Years War and the Western Schism. As much as violent events, like the Crusades, affected how people understood a culture and its differences, they were not an exclusive measurement for how white communities perceived non-white communities; nor were they the only events that brought together diverse populations.

Such conversations become important foundational knowledge in classrooms and remind students that cultural constructs are not static modes of viewing the world. While visible differences often shape the general understanding of an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, the complexity and nuance of what defines 'visible difference' goes through a constant process of revision and change over time. Possibly one of the most puzzling Middle English Crusader romances is *Richard Coer de Lyon*—a romance that details the adventures of Richard the Lionheart. Written sometime between the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the text survives in two versions, A—the romance version—and B—the chronicle version. Many students approach the text with expectations that Richard's characterization aligns with those learned from popular media, particularly from various adaptations of Robin Hood. The long-awaited arrival of King Richard at the end of both Disney's 1973 version and Kevin Reynold's 1991 version, featuring Kevin Costner, signals the end of Prince John's tyranny and a return to prosperous normalcy. As such, students associate Richard the Lionheart with positive kingly attributes—protector of people and beloved hero. They consequently struggle to reconcile these images with the Richard of this text, who consistently performs excessive violence against the innocent and the vulnerable.

Although historically inspired, the romance features a myriad of fantastical elements, including Richard's ability to rip a lion's innards out through its mouth and a demon mother unable to watch others receive the host. The episodes that have produced the most critical attention are surprisingly not martial but those that feature Richard's cannibalism, as the works of Geraldine Heng, Nicola F. McDonald, and Leona Cordery demonstrate—and for good reason, since the line between heroic and demonic blurs as Richard consumes the flesh of his enemies.[7] History records indicate that King Richard I did indeed suffer an illness similar to the fictional illness of the poem. Such records, however, do not evidence cannibalism as the remedy that cured historical Richard—a departure that the *RCL* poet quickly capitalizes on (Heng 63). While ill, Richard craves nothing but pork, though his fellow crusaders cannot find the meal that will satiate his palate. To placate the ailing king, Richard's retainers cook a young Saracen captive and serve him to Richard (ed. Larkin, line 3110). Disturbing as the act of cannibalism appears, the text positions Richard as unaware that he consumes human flesh. Heng recounts how Richard's followers "give thanks to 'Jesus and Mary' for their help," a narrative inclusion that makes "the point clear: The king's cannibalism is sanctioned by God, no less" (64). Readers are likely to forgive Richard for his actions, aware that the dying king presumed he consumed the requested pork, and perhaps even understand the desperation that motivated his followers' deception. Moreover, as Sonja Mayrhofer reminds readers of the text, the consumption of human flesh for healing purposes was not an entirely foreign medical practice to Europeans (83).[8] However, Richard's cannibalism does not occur in isolation. His decision to continue consuming human flesh challenges how students interpret Richard and his actions and forces them to question whether he functions as a hero or an anti-hero. As much as students will remember the act of cannibalism as they continue reading, such brief episodes also force students to reconsider previous moments of violence, reframing Richard as a figure both emblematic of Crusader ideology and also problematically vicious.

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[7] For more information consult Heng, McDonald, and Cordery.

[8] Mayrhofer argues that there was a market for human flesh and excretions, which she claims is termed "mummy" or *mumia* from the Arabic word *mumiya* (83). She continues saying that the works of Galen, Paracelus, and Avicenna all argue for the curative properties of some body parts, including blood, fat, marrow, and dung. While Mayrhofer argues that most cases of medical cannibalism are from the early modern period, she further observes that the writings of these medical professionals were known throughout Europe, which consequently assumes knowledge of cannibalism for medical purposes.

Fully recovered from his illness, Richard returns to battle and drives back Saladin's forces. Weary from battle, however, Richard fears the return of his ailment and demands the remaining pork to ward off potential ill-health. To Richard's surprise, the cook does not bring him the head of a pig, but the head of a Saracen man. Instead of revulsion—a reaction students might expect—Richard reacts with amusement, exclaiming:

"What? Is Sarezynys flesch thus good,	"What, is Saracens' flesh this good?
And nevere erst I nought wyste?	And I never knew it until now?
By Goddys deth and Hys upryste,	By God's death and his resurrection,
Schole we nevere dye for defawte	We shall never die for hunger
Whyl we may in any assawte	While we may, in any assault,
Slee Sarezynys, the flesch mowe taken,	Slay Saracens, take their flesh,
Sethen and roste hem and doo hem baken,	Boil them and roast them and bake them,
Gnawen here flesche to the bones.	And gnaw the flesh from their bones.
Now I have it provyd ones,	Now that I have proved it once,
For hungyr, ar I be woo,	Before hunger makes me wretched,
I and my folk schole eete moo!"	I and my folk shall eat more!" (3216-3226)[9]

Such a response works against student expectations for civility and for gentility from a king. Richard shocks audiences further in later scenes by orchestrating *more* cannibalism: When Saracen envoys arrive to bargain for the release of their compatriots, Richard arranges a celebratory dinner to commemorate their negotiations. The envoys, however, do not anticipate that the Crusader-king will serve them the roasted heads of Saracen prisoners. Amused by the horrified reactions of his guests, Richard takes his perceived joke a step farther and carves into the head before him, warning Saladin's men that English soldiers will not leave until they have eaten every Saracen man, woman, and child (see ll. 3561-3562).

The critical responses that suggest Richard is emblematic of Crusader ideology, despite his violence, demonstrate both the complexity of his character and that he is representative of a distinctly medieval culture. Richard sees religion as the major marker of difference between his enemies and himself, not skin pigmentation. Moreover, as the son of the fictional Cassodorien—a demon princess of Antioch—he is a half-devil figure whose actions situate him between hero and villain. The text continuously points to the violence of Richard's actions and the fear that he inspires in everyone, including his own subjects who continuously refer to him as "a devil and no man" (trans. Terrel, l. 500). McDonald reads that both Saracen *and* French allied forces "censure Richard" in his dietary decisions, either explicitly or implicitly (133). The French reaction is particularly telling, since, as McDonald comments, France acts as an "anti-typ[e] against whom the English Christian is measured" (133). Such juxtaposition demonstrates the divide between these burgeoning European polities and reminds readers that Richard acts for *England* rather than for Europe—an observation that Alan

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[9] The Middle English text is quoted from the edition by Larkin, the translation is taken from Terrel.

Ambrisco argues results from the rise of protonationalistic attitudes in England during the periods of composition for both versions of the text (511-522). McDonald's and Ambrisco's comments about *RCL* reflect a common scholarly understanding of Crusader texts across the tradition.[10] As much as the Christian-Saracen conflict propels narrative drama, texts in this tradition frequently depict Christian-on-Christian discord.

Narrative discord reveals the fractured relationships between European polities, demystifying the presumption of many modern students that a unified whole existed under the banner of Christ. As we see in *The Siege of Jerusalem*, *The Chanson de Roland*, and the *Alexiad*, conflict between allies influenced the outcomes of these texts as much as conflict between Christians and Saracens. In other instances, romances lay claim to historical figures typically associated with other regions of Latin Christendom, appropriating them for nationalistic uses. Such appropriations frequently demonstrate the underlying historical tensions between European polities. The modern fantasy of a united Europe fighting against Saracen hordes in the Holy Land is just that—a fantasy. The Crusades may have dominated the imagination of medieval peoples, but the romance of the events more than the reality shaped collective memory. However, the collective memory served to solidify individual polities, not a united front against eastern nations, as alt-right arguments today may have people believe. As much as our modern memory frames the Crusades as a cut and dry, "us versus them" narrative, the reality of the events articulates much more complex relationships and struggles. Indeed, the textual inclusions of diverse groups, episodes of conversion, and moments of in-fighting throughout the tradition demonstrate how unstable religious and racial identities were for medieval people and communities.

An in-depth study of *RCL* teaches students this important lesson of instability and creates opportunities for them to learn how such misconceptions of the racial "us versus them" narrative were invented and gained momentum historically. Moreover, it empowers them to see the complexity behind the seemingly innocuous and to participate in debates with informed opinions. While students may feel as though conversations about *RCL* will only occur within the classroom, such knowledge *is* applicable to the modern world around them. Indeed, King Richard I and his memorialization recently became the subject of much debate in the United Kingdom for his controversial and complicated history. A careful examination by current scholars reveals that perhaps the famed king was more brutal and misogynist than history typically remembers, forcing people to consider whether his statue outside of Westminster Abbey in London appropriately reflects the England of today or is an unsavory reminder of England's more complicated past (Musgrove).

Additionally, in 2012, Clayton Montgomery created a patch that depicts "Pork-Eating Crusaders" and sold them on his website, Mil-Spec Monkey. Very quickly, Montgomery and his company sold 10,000 of these patches, many of them going to members of the military. The popularity of the patch led to an expansion of the line to include other patches, such as "Infidel Strong," all of which are still available on their website today under the monikers "Troublemakers Section" and "Infidel" (Gourley). Such crassness for the ongoing conflict between the United States and the Middle East belittles the struggles and violence that have haunted the years since 9/11—for everyone. Although worn potentially as a joke or an ironic nod to the endless failure of American policy-maker decisions as they relate to Middle Eastern politics and relationships, the wearers of these patches nevertheless flaunt an image of a figure they may not fully understand. The patches and clothing that display Crusaders eating pork unwittingly recall Richard's cannibalism and alter the intent of such iconography. As much as Richard is emblematic of Crusader ideology, he is not a character for modern audiences to emulate, but a figure for them to question. As Ambrisco reminds us, "For Richard and the poet, cannibalism is not a deed to be renounced, but a mark of how far the English are willing to go to accomplish their divinely inspired task" (516). When we as educators present such observations to students, we remind them that Richard is a figure whose racial and religious ideologies do not translate to modern contexts. More importantly, American audiences are left to wonder—is this how we would want our enemies to perceive us today? Are we willing to go that far for victory?

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[10] For further reading see also Kinoshita.

Students of *RCL* and medieval studies can answer simply and without hesitation—no.

When white Americans imagine themselves as ceaseless conquerors, even jokingly, they accomplish two things: First, they perpetuate an image of themselves that is taken out of context and presented without consideration for the identity politics of the medieval period. Cannibalistic Richard may intimidate the Saracen enemy forces, but he lives in a society that did not see race and religion as the "us versus them" narrative that modern audiences might imagine they did; such tactics, therefore, are specific to *his* time period rather than applicable across space and time. Second, while the creator of this clothing may originally have meant it as a joke, the further use of Crusader iconography by groups who spread problematic and racist agendas means that this is not perceived as a joke by everyone. Instead, it propagates a fantasy of violence that has gained ground with people who do not see the humor of the "white devil" hypocrisy.

I want to conclude with a call to action to my fellow educators. Perhaps we assume that spreading awareness of medieval history and literature is solely a medievalist's responsibility. However, such departments and courses receive less attention than those of their colleagues across campuses and in classrooms. We can all work together to ward off and dispel assumptions about the medieval period—that the "Dark Ages" are only about white, middle-aged, European men or that modern-day conceptions of race, gender, and nation functioned then as they do now. Otherwise, we let students assume that these constructs have never changed, which leaves them without hope that they ever will.

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