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Mechanized Identity: The Blood-Mill of Richard Coer de Lyon

Cover Page Footnote

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Mechanized Identity:

The Blood-Mill of *Richard Coer de Lyon*

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THE Middle English romance *Richard Coer de Lyon* is not often read as a text fascinated with machinery. The semi-historical, superlative, titular character and his various marvelous and deeply disturbing deeds usually claim the most scholarly attention, and not without reason. There is much to examine in the heroically cannibalistic Richard, who presents a complex and often troubling vision of the construction of the English and the Saracen within romance. Also deserving of critical attention, though, is the text's strange attention to sieges and siege engines. Richard's army transports a large, named siege tower and countless throwing engines such as trébuchets, ballistas, crossbows, and mangonels. One device in particular seems to perform an explicitly symbolic function: the mill aboard one of Richard's ships, a machination designed to look like it grinds dead bodies.

While the mill is a useful psychological weapon against the fictional Saracen army, I argue that it principally serves as a manifestation of some of the core ideological movements of the romance. In particular, it is a physical representation of the budding English identity that destroys the Saracens in order to create sustenance for the English community. This destructive and transformative process relies on a body of technical knowledge shared exclusively between the crusading army and the English reader, a manufactured community reflected by the construction and operation of complex machines. To better understand the representative function of Richard's mill, it is necessary to explore some key qualities of medieval fictional machines, including their deceptive elements, inherent impersonality, and literalizing function. The destructive effects of the English community are further represented through the appearance of several other war machines in the poem, episodes that are best understood after a focused reading of Richard's blood-mill.

The Blood-Mill

The longest sustained description of a mechanical device in *Richard Coer de Lyon* appears as Richard's fleet enters the harbor of Acre. After Richard

single-handedly severs the great chain stretched across the harbor that was meant to stop his armada, the poem describes a great mill aboard one of Richard's ships, which the Saracen soldiers see and immediately flee from in terror. The description of the great mill should first be considered in full:

<p>Ovyr al othere wyttyrly, A melle he made of gret maystry, In myddes a schyp for to stande Swylke on sawgh nevere man in land. Foure sayles were thertoo, Yelew and grene, rede and bloo, Whith canveas layd wel all aboute, Full schyr withinne and eke withoute, Al within ful of feer Of torches maad with wex ful cleer; Ovyrtwart and endelang, With strenges of wyr the stones hang, Stones that deden nevere note: Grounde they nevere whete no grote, But rubbyd als they were wood. Out of the eye ran red blood Before the trowgh ther stood on, Al in blood he was begon, And hornes grete upon hys hede: Sarezynes therof hadden grete drede. For it was within the nyght They were agrysed of that syght, They wende it hadde ben mennes bones. And sayd he was the devyll of hell, That was come them to quell. A lytyl before the lyght of day, Clenly they were don away.</p>	<p>Surpassing all others skillfully, He made a mill with great mastery, Which in the middle of a ship stood Such a one never a man saw on land. Four sails were there, Yellow and green, and red and blue, Well laid about with canvas, Fully secured within and without, All full of fire within Of torches made with fully clear wax; Over-thwart and end-long The stones hung with strings of wire, Stones that never did work: They never ground wheat nor grain, But rubbed as if they were mad. Out of the eye ran red blood Before the trough one stood there, He was covered all in blood And with great horns upon his head: Saracens therefore had great dread. For it was within the night They were afraid of that sight, They thought they were men's bones. And said he was the devil of hell, That was come to quell them. A little before the light of day, They were cleanly done away [fled].¹</p>
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Because the mill, which for clarity I will call the blood-mill, is given such attention and because it appears to do entirely psychological and not physical damage, this poetic moment is a good place to focus an analysis of the imaginative workings of siege machines in *Richard*. Although this description is confusing in several ways, the basic realities of this device are clear. First, it at least resembles, if not operates, like a normal windmill: it has four sails, a set of grinding stones, and a chute out of which comes the finished material, here apparently blood. Second, it is better constructed than a normal mill and set to an entirely different purpose. It has been made with “gret maystry” [great mastery] (2656), and it is unlike any other device of the same name: “Swylke on sawgh nevere man in land” [such a one never a man saw on the land] (2659). The purpose and operation of this blood-mill is strangely vague, despite its very specific description. It is, however, clear that it does not do what normal mills do, for its stones have “Grounde they nevere whete

no grote” [They never ground wheat nor grain] (2668), and out of the mill chute comes “red blood” (2670). The poem incorporates other technical, if extraneous details: the wire holding the millstone runs “Ovyrtwart and endelang” [over-thwart and end-long] (2665) over the ship, and the torches are “maad with wex ful cleer” [made with fully clear wax] (2664). Whatever the actual function of the device, the Saracens believe that it grinds the bones of dead men and so they flee in terror.

In his book *The Medieval Siege*, Malcom Hebron argues that this is probably an actual shipboard grain mill, which the Saracens, thanks to Richard’s demonic reputation, mistake to be grinding men’s bones.² However, the description above does not lend itself to this interpretation. The description of the blood-mill follows a list of throwing machines at Richard’s disposal. The blood-mill is made with skill “Ovyr al othere” [Surpassing all others] (2655); that is, it is superior to all other machines in the mastery of its construction. Thus it appears to be the crown jewel of Richard’s prepared war, the most acute demonstration of technical proficiency, not simply a grain mill used to feed the army. Additionally, the impression of a demonic bone grinder seems quite deliberate. It is unclear if the figure standing before the mill’s trough, who is “Al in blood... begon, / And hornes grete upon hys hede” [covered all in blood / and with great horns upon his head] (2672 – 2673), is Richard himself or another unidentified soldier, but the figure appears as a devil against a fiery, blood-soaked backdrop. As the blood-mill is said to have never ground any grain, it does not seem to have a purpose apart from the fear it produces. There is no mention of the physical damage the blood-mill causes, unlike the descriptions of the army’s other war machines. It throws no missiles and it disappears once the army lands. Yet it is valued more greatly than Richard’s other, more practical throwing machines. As it is presented here, the blood-mill is a weapon of a purely psychological nature. It has been masterfully built to take advantage of Richard’s demonic reputation and make the Saracens fear his coming enough to flee and allow the English forces to land peacefully.

Machines and Deception

In order to understand how the blood-mill deception functions in *Richard*, I will turn to scholarship on other mechanical devices in medieval literature. Joyce Tally Lionarons in “Magic, Machines, and Deception: Technology in the ‘Canterbury Tales’” explores the blurring of magic and machines, a discussion that is particularly helpful to this analysis of Richard’s blood-mill. Through an analysis of the brass horse of *The Squire’s Tale*, a machine shaped like a horse that allows the user to fly anywhere in the world, she develops the idea that the underlying characteristic of both magic and technology in Chaucer’s writing (and perhaps medieval literature in general) is the potential for deception. Much of Lionarons’s analysis rests on the reactions of the people in Cambyskan’s court, who initially think the mechanical horse may be a great and useful gift to their lord, but who ultimately regard it with distrust.³ From their reactions and other instances of magic in the *Canterbury Tales*, she concludes, “Such devices rely, like magic, on

knowledge that is not readily available to common people; like magic, they can be used to deceive the ignorant; perhaps, like magic, they also draw on knowledge improper for human beings to have, since they can tempt a person to try to go beyond the natural limitations of humanity.³ Although Lionarons focuses on the possible danger of technology in Chaucer's writing, her work provides a very helpful diagnostic for understanding the borders between groups of people in *Richard*. In this text, technological knowledge, ambiguous with magical knowledge, belongs to certain people and not to others, and those who do not possess that knowledge are potential victims of it. Because the blood-mill is the work of master craftsmen, it is a technology that operates on skill or knowledge inaccessible to most people. It is also purposefully deceptive. It causes the Saracens to believe that a demon has come to destroy them. Even more importantly, they fear that it will grind them to pieces, and their terror drives them to flee from an object that in actuality would do very little actual damage in battle. The blood-mill deploys specialized knowledge to deceive those without that knowledge. Furthermore, the blood-mill's diabolical trappings suggest that it has supernatural origins. To the Saracens, it seems that only a demon could have constructed such a horrific machine, built from a hell-based blueprint.

The anxiety that Lionarons ascribes to technology depends on one's access to an uncommon body of knowledge. It is important to recognize that the terrors of the blood-mill only manifest themselves in the Saracen army. Only the Saracens are anxious at the possibility of extra-human knowledge, because they are the only ones deceived by the blood-mill. There is no mention at all of the mill's effect on the crusading army on shore or the rest of the English armada. No crusader soldier looks toward the blood-mill with fear, and the poet seems to focus entirely on the beneficial effects of the device. There is no indication that the English fear or should fear the mill, yet the knowledge of its function and construction would only belong to a few of the English at best. In theory, the rest of the English army should also fear its origins. However, there are two qualities of the blood-mill that prevent the English from falling prey to the blood-mill's terrifying deception, and initially these qualities appear to contradict each other.

The first is the parallel between Richard and the mill. It is abundantly clear that the knowledge of the blood-mill belongs in some respect to Richard himself, or more accurately the blood-mill manifests some of him. While he presumably did not actually build the blood-mill himself, the poem ascribes the blood-mill to Richard directly: "A melle he made of gret maystry" [he made a mill with great mastery] (2656). It is his mill; he gave the orders to have it built. Furthermore, the blood-mill makes literal some of his terrifying qualities, as do other physical objects within the romance. For example, Richard is described playing a game of chess while out at sea with one of his lords. Megan Leitch argues that his skill as a politician and military leader is manifested directly through his working of the chessboard; his victory in chess situates his leadership above that of his underling.⁵ Similarly, the blood-mill can be seen as another manifestation of Richard, but instead of demonstrating his tactical mind, the blood-mill represents his insidious qualities. The Richard of the romance is half demon; his demonic mother

was able to pass as a mortal for many years before being confronted and exiled. Richard's parentage serves him well, oddly enough, giving him inhuman strength, which he uses again and again. Furthermore, Richard becomes a cannibal while on crusade, eating several Saracens—first unknowingly, then intentionally—to regain his health. The horned figure in front of the mill, “Al in blood he was begon, / And hornes grete upon hys hede” [He was covered all in blood / and with great horns upon his head] (2672 – 2673), echoes quite pointedly Richard's demonic qualities, and the Saracens' belief that “he was the devyll of hell” [he was the devil of hell] (2679) come to destroy them is not as hyperbolic as it might at first seem. The blood-mill projects the most destructive qualities of the English warlord, and it becomes an extension of his person. The English army need not fear the blood-mill because they need not fear Richard. He is their heroic leader.

Machines and Impersonality

The second quality of the blood-mill that prevents it from victimizing the English seems at first contradictory to the first quality, that the blood-mill is a manifestation of Richard. This quality is that no technical knowledge can be entirely attributed to one person; technical knowledge must be shared among a larger community, however it is attributed. Mildred Leake Day's work on an odd appearance of technology in romance is helpful to this analysis. Day closely analyzes the appearance of Greek fire in *De ortu Waluuanii*, in which Sir Gawain must overcome a Saracen ship equipped with the weaponized chemical. Day argues that this encounter takes the structural place of a heroic test against some great unusual or hellish danger, and she comments on the implications of the presence of a machine:

For all the author's efforts to create the aura of the evil magicians behind the weapon, the impersonal, mechanical aspects of the technology dominate. A double-bellows siphon is a machine; Greek fire is a chemical formula. This is a mystery of a different order from a Green Knight whose head is replaceable. The author tries to create horror around his weapon, but, in the final analysis, Gawain must attack the seaman operating the machine, an anonymous figure far removed from the evil genius who created it.⁶

Day insists that the technology, however the poem might try to tie it to a specific person, is ultimately an impersonal, nebulous entity, created by a particular person, operated by another, but ultimately based on a knowledge that exists separately from either. Gawain may kill the operator and dismantle that particular machine, but his victory remains incomplete.

The same impersonality persists around Richard's mill. Richard is its master, but he is separate from the men who built it. Perhaps Richard devised the concept, but others turned it into a reality, and still others may take part in its operation. The knowledge of the blood-mill is a body of restricted, shared knowledge. Although the technical nature of the mill's description does not reveal what the blood-mill is or does, the technical details do

propagate a sense of shared knowledge. The sails of the blood-mill are “Whith canveas layd wel all aboute, / Full schyr withinne and eke withoute” [well laid about with canvas, / fully secured within and without] (2661 – 2662), and the grindstone is hung “Ovyrtwart and endelang, / With strenges of wyr” [over-thwart and end-long / with strings of wire] (2665 – 2666). These semi-technical details go beyond naming the blood-mill a work of “gret maystry” [great mastery]; they indicate how well the construction demonstrates said mastery. Someone well-versed in the making of mills, a likely minority among the poem’s audience, might recognize why it is important that these elements are constructed this way, whereas for the vast majority of audience, these details create the illusion of knowledge, sharing that the sails are “layd wel all aboute” [well laid all about] because they have canvas inside and out. The audience is included within the community of shared technical knowledge, while those components also become part of the larger function of the device. This is something of a behind-the-scenes moment; the poet provides the audience with knowledge usually held by a small group of specialists. The knowledge of the blood-mill belongs to the English reading audience as much as it belongs to the fictional Richard.

Initially it seems impossible for the blood-mill to both belong to Richard and to no one. How can the shared knowledge be both a general impersonal entity and individually linked to the English king? The answer is that the blood-mill does not represent Richard, but rather the blood-mill and Richard are both facets of their shared Englishness. Richard is himself a manifestation of communal English knowledge. Peter Larkin, in the introduction to his edition of *Richard Coeur de Lyon*, argues that the poem uses the figure of Richard to make the English the chosen people of God: “The typological resonance of Richard’s cannibalism and other acts reveal that he, standing for all Englishmen, replaces the Franks as the English become *populi Dei* [people of God].”⁷ I would argue that the blood-mill represents one of the mechanisms by which Richard can stand in for all Englishmen in this romance. He draws upon a shared body of knowledge, English knowledge even, to create a device that produces a mass deception against a people excluded from that shared knowledge. Even though the rest of the English army does not possess immediate technical knowledge of the blood-mill, they have access to the knowledge community through Richard. Richard represents the English and because the blood-mill is linked to him, the English have indirect access to what is represented by the blood-mill. The Saracens share neither in the representative nor in the technical knowledge of the blood-mill, and so they fall victim to the English king and army.

Machines and Manifestation

In order to fully understand the nature of the body of knowledge inherent in Richard’s mill and its Englishness, it is necessary to more broadly examine the blood-mill’s metaphorical or representational qualities. Other imagined medieval machines, and the ways that scholars have interpreted them, can help reveal those qualities. Thus this analysis returns again to Chaucer’s horse of brass. Through an extended reading of the brass horse in her book

Time and the Astrolabe in The Canterbury Tales, Marijane Osborn comes to the conclusion that the horse is in fact a reimagined astrolabe,⁸ in which each detail of the horse relates in some respect to one of the various components of the instrument.⁹ She further connects the brass horse and astrolabe to observable horse constellations and stars, arguing that the Squire describes star patterns that would be visible to someone who was well-versed with an astrolabe.¹⁰ Osborn makes this connection so strongly that it is difficult to refute, but she does very little to expand upon the implications of such a connection. Even so, Osborn makes a few points useful to this analysis of Richard's blood-mill. At one point in her argument, Osborn explores the relationship between the horse's ability to travel and the face of an astrolabe. She comments on the typical use of the pointer, or label, on the astrolabe: "By turning not this astrolabic 'horse' itself but the 'label'...and the rete or cutout star map that lies under it, one may indeed journey, as Cambuskan is invited to do, wherever in the cosmos one wishes, all within the 'space' of twenty-four hours engraved on the outer periphery of the mother plate."¹¹ The rhetorical motion Osborn makes here is critical: she equates the journey of mental exercise through the astronomical calculation of an astrolabe to the literal journey of the brass horse in the imagined tale. Whereas an astronomer can only transport through his thoughts using an astrolabe, Cambuskan can transport his physical being by means of the brass horse. The astrolabe is itself a representation of a body of knowledge, specifically the mathematics and observations of astronomy. It manifests that knowledge in a physical form, which then allows part of the implementation of that knowledge to be realized, here the mental journey through the cosmos. The horse takes the role of representation further, as it makes physical and literal the imagined implementation of astronomy. Thus the relationship between the brass horse, a device, and astronomy, a body of knowledge, is one of illustrative metaphor.

This kind of metaphorical relationship provides a metric to analyze the body of knowledge behind Richard's blood-mill. By returning to the function of the blood-mill, the shared knowledge behind it can be reverse-engineered. The first and most obvious function of the blood-mill has already been thoroughly examined above; it is a weapon that instills fear in those outside the knowledge community. The second function of the blood-mill is demonstrated by the latter half of its description: "Grounde they [the millstones] nevere whete no grote, / But rubbyd als they were wood. / Out of the eye ran red blood" [they never ground wheat or grain / but rubbed as if they were mad. / Red blood ran out of the eye] (2668 – 2670). This device operates as other mills do—grinding a substance to create a finer product—and thus it is situated in a larger representative framework. Mills are often used in other medieval texts as representational objects. D.W. Robertson, in reference to a capital carving at Vézelay that portrays Moses pouring grain into a mill, which then produces flour for the waiting hands of St. Paul, explains the position of "the Epistles of St. Paul, which formed the source of inspiration for the tradition of allegorical exegesis during the Middle Ages. Hence his fame in medieval art as the 'miller' who grinds the 'grain' of the Prophets to produce the 'flour' of the New Law."¹² Here used by St. Paul, the mill is a

device that creates new meaning out of the old meaning fed into it. The body of knowledge represented by the mill is transformative—the mill takes some other body of knowledge and grinds it into something else. Whereas most mills grind grain to produce flour, Richard’s blood-mill grinds no grain, with the suggestion that it grinds human bones instead and produces blood. It would seem that this device is designed to take Saracen bodies and their attached meanings and then destroy them to produce some other meaning. Rodney Delasanta traces another useful element of the larger medieval function of the mill, which might help illuminate the blood-mill’s final product. In his discussion of the mill in Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale*, in which a miller and his family are duped and violated by a pair of clerks, Delasanta identifies a definitively apocalyptic association with the mill: “the silence of the mills signals the destruction of the city.”⁷³ The mill then represents the life of the city, as the end of one marks the end of the other. Considering the physical function of the mill, this makes sense; the mill creates sustenance for the community. Connecting then the function of the blood-mill to the body of knowledge behind it, Richard’s mill makes sustenance for the community by destroying and transforming the bodies of fallen Saracens.

Englishness in the Machine

The blood-mill’s transformation of Saracen bodies into food clearly foreshadows Richard’s infamous cannibalism that occurs later in the poem. When Richard serves cooked Saracen prisoners to Saladin’s⁷⁴ emissaries, he issues a particularly interesting statement, “I you waraunt, / there is no flesch so norysshaunt / Unto an Ynglyssche Crysten man / ...As is the flesh of a Saryzyne” [I warrant you, / there is no flesh as nourishing to an English, Christian man / ...as is the flesh of a Saracen] (3547 – 3553). Larkin comments on this phrase in his introduction to the text, “In this aggressive formulation that scholars connect to the Eucharist, Richard defines Englishness through the consumption of Saracen flesh.”⁷⁵ Geraldine Heng has thoroughly explored the nationalizing effects of Richard’s cannibalism in her book *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, and she argues that in *Richard Coeur de Lyon* cannibalism is an explicit trope of conquest and colonization.⁷⁶ If the blood-mill is read in conjunction with Richard’s English cannibalism, Heng’s picture of conquest is made more complex. Richard’s feeding on Saracen flesh is made part of his Englishness in the poem, or more aptly, the Saracen flesh sustains his English being better than any other food. The blood-mill is a tool that enables consumption. It physically takes the raw form of the food and grinds it into something edible. If the blood-mill can indeed be read in the same way as the brass horse, then the action of making Saracen bodies edible is representative of an action of thought, which belongs to a shared body of knowledge. This then is the heart of the shared body of knowledge made manifest in the mill: Englishness is sustained by the destruction of the Saracen. The fearful aspects of the blood-mill are thus readily explained. The blood-mill represents a desire not to conquer and subjugate, but to destroy and consume. Just as the brass horse allows astronomy to physically affect travel, so too the

blood-mill allows English identity to create literal sustenance out of fallen Saracen warriors.

The nourishment of identity through war, specifically war between the English and the Saracens, is not a new concept. Siobhain Calkin traces how the romance *Of Arthour and of Merlin* replaces much of the inter-British conflict of Arthur's early reign with Saracen invasions. Calkin comes to the conclusion that this incessant war does not destabilize Arthur's political structure, but actually "revitalizes and reunifies the 'Inglich' realm," in part because it does away with inter-British political tension.¹⁷ The knowledge behind the blood-mill is more than knowledge; it is also a self-aware self-identification. This is where the blood-mill differs from the function of the brass horse. The brass horse takes a knowledge that can be learned and turns it into physical capability; yet one does not need to identify as an astronomer to use the brass horse, or even to use an actual astrolabe. Only the possession of certain knowledge or skills is necessary. The mill, on the other hand, is a manifestation of mental community. Shared knowledge is the result of a shared identity, independent of the technical working of any one device. Thus the blood-mill is the deployment of an English community that benefits by the specialization and skills of its individual members. Richard's great strength and deeds, though unique, benefit all the English. The mill, or any other mechanical device, may be built and operated by a master engineer, but it is a device that benefits the whole community, and, specifically in the case of the blood-mill, it nourishes the community while destroying another. Perhaps through this communal framework, Richard is no longer a required intermediary. If the technical or hidden bodies of knowledge provide a visible service to the community at large, they cease to be a source of anxiety.

Other siege weapons of *Richard Coer de Lyon* perform similar representational functions, demonstrating carnivorous Englishness through their physical mechanisms. Second to the blood-mill in poetic presence is the siege tower Richard first deploys during the conflict over Cyprus. Richard's description of the tower outlines its role in the shared English community:

I have a castell, I understonde,
 Is made of tembre of Englonde,
 With syxe stages full of tourelles
 Well flourysshed with cornelles;
 Therin I and many a knight
 Ayenst the Frensshe shall take the fight.
 That castle shall have a surnownne:
 It shall hyght the mate-gryffon.

[I have a tower, I understand, / which is made from the timber of
 England, / with six levels of turrets / well flourished with arrow-slots;
 / therein I and many a knight / shall take fight against the French.
 That tower shall have a surname: It shall be called the *Mate-Gryffon*.]
 (1849 – 1856)

Unlike the mill, this construction has a clear combat purpose. It provides a place from which the chivalrous knights of England can do battle with the soldiers of Cyprus and France, a function in which it proves quite effective. The relationship of the tower to Englishness is overtly made: it is built out of the “tembre of Englonde” [timber of England] (1850), physically made of the shared raw material of England and thus taking shape out of the English community. Furthermore, the tower is presented in a way that invokes a shared knowledge. The audience learns that it has six different levels, each well-supplied with places to shoot from. These details are technical and not strictly descriptive in nature; Richard is communicating its battle effectiveness through its specifications. As with the blood-mill, the description of the siege tower creates the sense of a body of knowledge shared with the reader, even if the technical aspects of the tower are not fully understood. The tower is a device of destruction, fostering, like the blood-mill, an English community through the destruction of the Saracen. Unlike the mill, however, the tower is not deployed exclusively against Saracens. Richard comments that the knights inside the tower are to fight specifically against the “Frenche” [French]. The name Richard gives the tower is also quite significant. Larkin glosses “mate-gryffon” as “kill-Greek.”⁸ It would seem then that the English war-fed identity is not limited to Saracens, but can be applied to other peoples as well. The construction of the tower mirrors the purpose of the blood-mill; the blood-mill uses the destruction of Saracen soldiers as a raw material to create sustenance for identity. The tower takes the raw material of identity to create “mate-gryffon,” a device deployed to destroy other Christian peoples. It might overstate the joint representational function of these two devices to assert that wars with Saracens sustain the English identity for wars with other Christian nations. While they both serve as physical manifestations of the shared war project, they appear within different poetic moments that do not appear to be specifically linked to each other. It is more appropriate to say that these two differing machines demonstrate that shared Englishness requires conflict with non-Englishness in general, and not only with the Saracens.

There are many other instances where siege machines appear in the text, but one is particularly useful for discussion. Two complex mechanical devices appear during Sir Thomas’s siege of the Saracen garrison at the castle Orglyous. The first belongs to the Saracen defenders. The Saracens send a spy into the crusader ranks, where he is immediately guessed out by Sir Thomas. Under threat, the spy describes the bridge by which the English should have crossed to the castle. He does so in a pointedly technical nature, saying “And undyrnethe is an hasp / Schet with a stapyl and a clasp; / And in that hasp a pyn is pylt... / And the pyn smeten out were, / down ye shoulde fallen there” [and underneath there is a hasp / shut with a staple and a clasp; / and in that hasp is a pin placed... / and were the pin struck out, / down you would fall there] (4111 – 4118). As with the other two machines discussed above, this description creates the sense of an uncommon body of knowledge behind the device. Unlike the other two devices, this one is built by Saracens to trick and destroy the English. That threatening body of knowledge is, however, defused entirely by the spy’s description of it.

Once the English are aware of the trap, they circumvent it and attack the city with a great “mangel” (4131), or stone-throwing machine. The spy says that the weapon is “Swylke knowen but fewe Sarezynes” [like such but a few Saracens know about] (4131). The Saracen defenders capitulate in complete terror after a single stone (granted a very large one) is thrown into the castle. If the reading of machines in this text holds here as it does above, this moment marks a direct conflict between two identities: the Saracen communal knowledge is revealed and rendered inert by one of their own, while the English shared knowledge (manifested in the great mangel) is successfully used, creating fear in those who do not share in that knowledge. It is interesting that the Saracen machine is never tested, and that it was effectively disarmed by the Saracen spy. This allows the possibility of dangerous Saracen knowledge to linger; it represents what could have been. The Saracen communal knowledge remains a threat, even as the English machinery proves itself to be superior, because the encounter provides a glimpse into a hostile knowledge community that can manifest itself in its own dangerous devices. Such a state of possible danger seems to justify the intense suspicion Thomas holds toward the spy, identifying him as soon as he opens his mouth.

Conclusion

There are many other more minor references to siege equipment and machinery littered throughout the poem, but a complete survey rests outside the scope of this paper. So too do several aspects and implications attached to these weapons. There appear to be many ways in which the mill’s demonic connotations fit with Richard’s demonic qualities, and it would take a great deal of work to reconcile these connotations within a clearly Christian English identity. Rather than treat them lightly or briefly here, it would be best to return to those implications as a separate inquiry. There are, however, several useful results of this analysis, which might go beyond the explanation of what appears to be a narrative oddity. The model of English identity as presented by the blood-mill contributes to the general conversation around identity and otherness in *Richard Coer de Lyon*. The blood-mill demonstrates how a body of knowledge is a principal component of community and may in fact create community through its shared dissemination. The community surrounding Richard takes on the characteristics of the mill, the manifestation of knowledge. *Richard Coer de Lyon* exhibits an English communal identity that destroys, grinds, consumes, and digests the adversarial Saracen, an English identity created and sustained through dangerous communal knowledge.



Notes

- 1 Peter Larkin, ed., *Richard Coer de Lyon*, lines 2655 – 2682. All quotations from *Richard Coer de Lyon* are from this edition, and unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 2 Malcom Hebron, *The Medieval Siege: Theme and Image in Middle English Romance*, 39.
- 3 Joyce Tally Lionarons, “Magic, Machines, and Deception: Technology in the ‘Canterbury Tales,’” 379.
- 4 *Ibid.* 382.
- 5 Megan G. Leitch, “Ritual, Revenge and the Politics of Chess in Medieval Romance,” 130.
- 6 Mildred Leake Day, “Sir Gawain and the Greek Fire: the Impact of Technology on the Heroic Imagination In *De Ortu Waluuanii*,” 16.
- 7 Peter Larkin, introduction to *Richard Coer de Lyon*, 20.
- 8 An astrolabe is an instrument made up of a series of engraved disks held together with a pin. Using an indicator called a “label,” the user can calculate the position of stars given a known latitude and time or vice versa.
- 9 Marijane Osborn, *Time and the Astrolabe in the Canterbury Tales*, 42.
- 10 *Ibid.* 47
- 11 *Ibid.* 42
- 12 D.W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective*, 290.
- 13 Rodney Delasanta, “The Mill in Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale*,” 274.
- 14 Saladin (Salah al-Din) was a powerful Islamic military and civil leader, whose tactical brilliance is often cited among the principal causes of the defeat and repulsion of the armies of the Third Crusade. In the *Richard* romance, he serves as a foil to Richard, the cunning leader of the enemy army.
- 15 Larkin, introduction to *Richard*, 18.
- 16 Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, 62.
- 17 Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript*, 202.
- 18 See Larkin’s note to line 1856.

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