

# 'The thing is grounded on story': The Danes and Medieval English Memory

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THE men of Coventry, pretending to be Vikings and pretending to pillage, are chasing women pretending to be Saxons and pretending to be frightened, through the town square. The year is 1416. It is Hock Tuesday, the second Tuesday after Easter. Yesterday, the women chased and 'hocked' the men by capturing and binding them and exacting a forfeit; today the men are doing the hocking. Nobody seems to know quite why the men are pretending to be Danes. If somebody in the crowd was pressed for an answer, she might say that it has something to do with the long lost past but not be able to articulate much more than that. It must have all seemed like part of an authentic, age-old tradition.

Robert Langham, a member of the Elizabethan court, gives an eyewitness account of the Coventry Hock-Tuesday festival that reports some of the locals' viewpoints on the festivities. After mentioning the Danes and Aethelred, he writes of the people of Coventry:

The thing, said they, iz grounded on story, and for pastime woont too bee plaid in our Citee yearly: without ill exampl of mannerz, papistry, or ony superstition: and elz did so occupy the heads of a number, that likely inoough wouold haue had woorz meditationz: had an auncient beginning, and a long continuauns: tyll noow of late laid dooun, they knu no cauz why, unless it wear by the zeal of certain theyr Preacherz.<sup>1</sup>

Langham implies that the pageantry is totally divorced from parish proceedings and Catholic practice, but has a basis in the historical reality of Coventry ('iz grounded on story'). According to the people of Coventry whom

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1 Cited in Chambers 1903, vol.ii, 264-5.

Langham had spoken with, the Hocktide traditions are 'auncient', having been continuously performed from ancient times. Yet despite their belief in the long-standing running of the plays, it has seemed clear to historians from at least the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that the 'historical' aspect of the plays was a recent addition. What seemed like 'auncient' but authentic history to spectators was designed to appear so.

Though the earliest reference to *hocedei* as a term-day on which rents were paid dates from 1175, evidence of a two-day folk festival known as 'Hock Day', 'Hock Tuesday' or 'Hocktide' dates only from 1416.<sup>2</sup> From the late-15<sup>th</sup> century, the central purpose appears to have been to raise money for the Church; the first recorded instance of Hocktide being used as a parish fundraising activity dates from 1469-70 in Cambridge. However, as Sally-Beth Maclean has suggested, its central motivation appears to have been first and foremost to provide two days of sport or play, offering people an early spring festival in which to enjoy 'a cathartic release of social tension channeled through ritualised inversion of the hierarchical social order that is characteristic of the Middle Ages.'<sup>3</sup> The ritual pageants became widespread by the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, reaching their apogee in the early-16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> After being banned for a brief period as popish superstition after England's break with Rome, the Coventry Hock Tuesday play was revived at the insistence of Elizabeth I at Kenilworth in 1575, where she must have witnessed the Saxon and Dane plays. Parishes in towns and cities in southern and central England were more likely to celebrate Hocktide than rural areas. Parishes in London, Reading, Salisbury, Oxford, Westminster, and Canterbury had celebrations. There is no extant evidence of Hocktide pageantries in the north and there seems to have been very few in the east, regions with significant Scandinavian descent.<sup>5</sup>

Though suggestions about the origins of the historical aspect of the pageantries have been offered since at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>6</sup> it remains unclear why from the early-15<sup>th</sup> century the festival came to include processions and symbolic battles commemorating the English defeat of the Danes. For MacLean, the rituals are based on 'a shadowy historical event' that has yielded nothing better than 'inconclusive speculation' about its origins.<sup>7</sup> At Coventry, the Hocktide play was thought by 19<sup>th</sup>-century antiquarians Brand and Ellis

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2 MacLean 1996, 234.

3 MacLean 1996, 238.

4 Hutton 1994, 59-60.

5 French 2008, 164-6.

6 See Brand and Ellis 1849, 185-9. MacLean offers a brief synopsis of 19<sup>th</sup>-century approaches to Hocktide. See MacLean 1996, 233-4.

7 MacLean 1996, 234.

to have commemorated the massacre of the Danes by Ethelred on St. Brice's Day in 1002, but the 15<sup>th</sup>-century chantry priest John Rous claims that it was connected with the sudden death of Harthacnut and the restoration of the Wessex line in 1042.<sup>8</sup> Neither explanation is satisfactory; Harthacnut died in the month of June and St. Brice's Day is celebrated on November 13, both well after the Easter season. What does seem clear is that the historical, Danish element of the Hocktide celebrations was entirely a 15<sup>th</sup>-century invention that was added on to already existing festival customs. The celebrations were probably not based on long-standing traditions (which themselves would have been based on some historical reality), but on the widespread popularity of historical romances in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in which the Danes played key roles as national enemies. Of the roughly ten Middle English romances that are set in England's past, five (*Havelok the Dane*, *Guy, Horn Childe*, *Arthur and Merlin*, and *Reinbrun*) feature invading Danes. Additionally, *Partonope of Blois* (c 1400x50), based on a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Old French romance, features invading Danes. Given the gap of time between the last invasions of the Danes in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of Hocktide plays, as well as the brief shelf life of popular memories without written or some other physical evidence, it appears likely that a tradition of the defeat of the Danes was being preserved and amplified in literature set in England's past, and these writings swayed people's notions about the history of their town, their region, and their nation.

Festivals in various parts of England began dramatizing battles between Saxons and Danes four hundred years after the last Danish invasion of England probably due to the increasingly widespread popularity through the 15<sup>th</sup> century of historical romances, chronicles, and ballads featuring the Danes. Throughout England, when somebody wanted to give something a bit of historical value, they would associate it with an 'ancient' story of the Danes. Defeating the Danes in 13<sup>th</sup>- and 14<sup>th</sup>-century romances set in the English past produced a singularly English victory, whereas a defeat of Saracens, often in the same work, was a Christian victory. In this paper, I argue that a literary tradition of the Danes as tyrannical usurpers stemmed from post-Conquest political campaigns in chronicles, where the Danes were delegitimized as barbaric outsiders, though many had settled in England, especially in the north and east. The key mechanism for the Normans in distancing themselves from their recent Scandinavian past and justifying their power in England was to vilify the Danes in chronicles which were attempting to weld Anglo-Saxon and Norman history and culture. As these chronicles aligned Anglo-Saxon and Norman pasts to craft a new story of England and the English, the

Danes were continually cast as wrong, ignoble conquerors, contrasted with the rightful, noble conquering of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons, and it is this characterization of the 'ever-present' Dane in the English past that Middle English historical romances preserve and develop. I conclude by considering the 'spectral Dane', terminology that I derive from scholars writing on the 'spectral Jew' in later medieval and early modern England, to suggest how historians, antiquarians, and romance writers conjured Danes everywhere they looked in the English past.

### The construction of the Danes in post-Conquest chronicles

After his decisive victory at Hastings, Duke William needed to portray his sovereignty as legitimate. William of Poitiers, commissioned to write a biography of Duke William, produced what was essentially a panegyric to William the Conqueror, the *Gesta Guillelmi* (*The Deeds of William*, c 1070s), in which the recently crowned king of the English was praised as *gloriosissimus dux*.<sup>9</sup> Unlike chroniclers who would follow William of Poitiers in the next century, the author of the *Gesta* was not concerned with crafting a narrative of continuity between the Wessex and Norman kings of England. Instead, he juxtaposed the English and Danes as the guilty parties aligned against the innocent Duke William, who in invading England and gaining the throne was merely claiming what was his by right. In William of Poitiers' account, the cruelty and perfidiousness of Earl Godwinson and his son Harold justifies the Normans' conquest and transforms Duke William's actions from invasion to legitimate vengeance. The political schema of the *Gesta* rests on the distinction between wrongful seizure of the throne and Duke William's rightful claim. William of Poitiers directly admonishes Earl Godwinson: 'By your treachery you shed the innocent blood of Normans, and in your turn the blood of your men will be shed by the blood of the Normans.'<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Norman invasion is not an invasion at all, but a justified claim to what was theirs by right. Blame is laid squarely at the feet of the Godwinsons.

In his stark distinction between royal legitimacy and illegitimacy, between innocence and guilt, William of Poitiers associates the former with the Conqueror and the latter with both the Godwinsons and the Danish kings of England. The *Gesta* opens by speaking of Cnut's reign in England (1016-35) as being acquired not by rightful means 'but to his own and his father's conquest'. Thus it had an illegitimacy equal to that of Harold Godwinson, the

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9 William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, 6-7.

10 William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, 7.

'mad Englishman' who 'violated his oath and seized the royal throne with acclamation, with the connivance of a few wicked men.'<sup>11</sup> At the Battle of Hastings 'huge forces of English' that had been 'assembled from all the shires' and wanted to 'defend against invaders even though their cause was unjust', were joined by those from '*terra Danorum*', 'the land of the Danes', who were 'allied by the blood' with the English and as a result 'sent copious forces.'<sup>12</sup> This claim of cooperation between the English and Danes is not found in other contemporary sources. Duke William, by contrast, has an unvarnished right to the throne and unfailingly acts with reason, mercy, and pity, and always within the bounds of the law of both peoples. The praise heaped on William is almost risible: he is 'equal in strength and surpassing in courage to Xerxes' and in 'London, after his coronation, he made many wise, just, and merciful provisions; some were for the interest and honour of the city, others to the profit of the whole people, and some to the advantage of the churches of the land. Whatever laws he promulgated, he promulgated for the best of reasons.'<sup>13</sup> There is a clear distinction in the *Gesta* between rightful and wrongful conquest, between right rule and wrong rule, and a concurrent distinction between the Normans on one side of that line and the English and Danes on another.

In the decade after the Conquest, there were clear political and martial reasons for William of Poitiers and the Normans to lambaste the Danes. As William of Poitiers was composing his biography of the Conqueror in the late 1060s and 1070s, the Danes – those of Danish ancestry who had settled and assimilated in the north and east of England as well as those who continued to invade northern England, especially King Swein II of Denmark in 1069 and 1074 – continued to pose a real threat to the Normans' young and fragile sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> The Danes, with potentially legitimate claims to the English throne, were essentially vying for power in Britain with the English and then with the Normans through much of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Cnut (1016-35), ruler of Denmark, Norway, and England, had married Emma of Normandy, the recent widow of Aethelred II, in 1017; because Emma was the daughter of Duke Richard of Normandy. In addition to solidifying his position in England, Cnut had also gained a foothold in Normandy. When Cnut's sons Harold Harefoot (r. 1037-40) and Harthacnut (r. 1040-2) both died without clear heirs, the line

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11 William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, 2-3, 100-01.

12 William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, 126-7.

13 William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, 113.

14 For general surveys of Scandinavians in England, see Hadley 2006, Hadley and Richards 2000, Loyn 1977, Stenton 1927; on the constitution and impact of the Danelaw, see Hadley 2000, Hart 1992; on Cnut and England as part of a vast Scandinavian empire, see Rumble 1994, Lawson 1993; on the Norman impact on the North and the changing world of the Anglo-Scandinavian population in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, see DeVries 1999, Kapelle 1979.

of Danish kings in England ended. Yet, in the years after the Conquest Danish fleets continued to be deployed to England, where in certain regions, especially around areas with considerable populations of Scandinavian descent such as York and Lindsey, these Danish armies found sympathetic English allies.<sup>15</sup> Perceptions of ethnic difference at the time of the Conquest may have been sharper between English and Norman than between English and Dane, at least in the parts of England that had experienced significant Scandinavian settlement.<sup>16</sup>

After the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Norman writers desired to delegitimize any Scandinavian claims to the English throne while carefully avoiding antagonizing and marginalizing the English. William the Conqueror and his successors, William Rufus and Henry Plantagenet, desired to be seen as the true successors to Edward the Confessor, whose own image as the saviour of the Wessex kings and of the English people and Church began to be burnished by 12<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Norman historians.<sup>17</sup> In turn, the immediate predecessors of Edward, the Danish kings, were delegitimized as their claims and kingship were drawn as antithetical to England's history of legitimate rule. According to Hugh Thomas, in late-11<sup>th</sup> century England there was a keen awareness of ethnic differences between English and Norman, and contemporary accounts of the Conquest like that of William of Poitiers thus make a clear distinction between English and Norman (or French) people.<sup>18</sup> Although the process of ethnic assimilation might have been at times intense, even brutal, during the 12<sup>th</sup> century the sense of a distinct Norman identity in England dissipated among the ruling elite, replaced by a 'single, undifferentiated English identity', according to R.R. Davies.<sup>19</sup> John Gillingham has argued that the Normans had thought of themselves as English no later than 1140, seeing the Anglo-Saxon past as their own and thereby crafting a keen sense of a culturally homogenous English people.<sup>20</sup> A single English identity was founded on the reclamation by 12<sup>th</sup>-century historians of English history, kings and saints, the land, and a concomitant insistence on the political illegitimacy of the Danes.<sup>21</sup>

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15 See Walker 1995, 26-8.

16 Lawson 1993, 47.

17 On William's view of Edward the Confessor, see Clanchy 1998, 24. In the Anglo-Norman poem *La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei* (c 1245), directly after his coronation William pays homage at the tomb of Edward the Confessor, opening it and placing a rich pall on him, thus completing the proper succession from Edward to William (*La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei*, l. 4665).

18 Thomas 2003, 46.

19 Davies 2000, 145. On the violence of post-Conquest assimilation, see Thomas 2003, 58-69, and Kapelle 1979, 106-41.

20 Gillingham 2000, 97-9.

21 Ashe 2007, 78.

As Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Saxon historiographical traditions coalesced in 12<sup>th</sup>-century histories, the Danes were increasingly isolated as the prime representatives of a non-Christian 'might is right' philosophy that clearly contrasted with the God-ordained English system of rightful rule by proper, lawful inheritance. At the same time, 12<sup>th</sup>-century historians crafted a narrative of continuity between the Anglo-Saxon monarchy and Norman dukedom by characterizing the English and the Normans as long-time allies momentarily on opposing sides at Hastings in 1066, thereby disentangling the alliance between Danes and English that William of Poitiers had emphasized. The theme of unjust Danish rule – through seizing the crown by force – as opposed to Wessex and Norman rule by right – through inheriting the crown through proper bloodlines – became part of the prevailing narrative of the transition from Anglo-Saxon to Norman sovereignty. After the 11<sup>th</sup> century, historians in England were less interested in strictly Norman history as the reconciliation of English kings and Norman dukes into a single legitimate line of succession, thus rendering the English past as a shared Anglo-Norman past. In this historiographic model, the Danish and English 'blood' connection suggested by an earlier anti-English writer like William of Poitiers had to be modified. The valorization of both Anglo-Saxon ancestry and the Norman kings is exemplified by the linking of Edward the Confessor to William the Conqueror, thus aligning the Wessex kings with the Norman kings as the proper line of succession. Henry II (r. 1154-89), whose mother Matilda was a claimant to the English throne and whose father, Geoffrey Plantagenet, was Duke of Normandy after 1144, was portrayed as the ultimate reconciliation between England's past and present. Aelred of Rievaulx, dedicating his *Genealogia regum Anglorum* (c 1153-4) to Henry II, gives the purpose of his history as a glorification of the 'integrity of [Henry II's] ancestors' and assures us that King Henry had 'bequeathed nobility of blood from the finest on both sides.'<sup>22</sup> Aelred clearly saw Henry (or at least was aware that Henry wanted to see himself) as the ultimate reconciliation between the Normans and the English. Laura Ashe has described Aelred's uniting of the blood of English and Norman in Henry II as a 'dramatic erasure', eliding and eclipsing potentially messy details in the pursuit of continuity, or 'a wholesale flattening of historical sense' that offers 'cultural utility to the present.'<sup>23</sup>

It was in this conciliatory model that the Danish kings of England, along with the Scandinavian populations that had settled in England, were cast as foreigners at best and tyrannical usurpers at worst. Though 12<sup>th</sup>-century historians of England continued to justify the Conquest, it became

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22 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Genealogia regum Anglorum*, 71.

23 Ashe 2007, 32-3.

increasingly impolitic to censure the English wholesale as immoral and barbarous. This was partly due to the mixed nature of the writers themselves: William of Malmesbury was half-Norman and half-English, Gerald of Wales was half-Norman and half-Welsh, and Orderic Vitalis, the son of a French priest and probably an English mother, was born in England and lived and wrote in Normandy. Each of these 12<sup>th</sup>-century historians was sympathetic to the Anglo-Saxons to some degree. While William, Gerald, and Orderic are certainly critical of Anglo-Saxons as well – William considers them effeminate drunks – the historians' works reveal an effort to incorporate the Anglo-Saxon historiographical tradition established by Bede and developed by Anglo-Saxon chroniclers and biographers into a new post-Conquest narrative. It became politically expedient to cast the Danes, potential rivals to Norman claims, as the primary historical enemy of England rather than continually alienate and vilify Harold Godwinsson or the Anglo-Saxons as a whole, people whom the new Norman rulers wished to pacify. Anglo-Norman chroniclers wanted to establish clear lines between the Anglo-Saxon Church and monarchy and the new Norman line. They wanted to show that the Anglo-Normans had worthy predecessors in England.

After the Conquest, the Danes in English histories were shaped into feudal overlords, burdening the good, Christian English with unjust taxes like the Danegeld and subjugating and humiliating the population. In Geoffrey Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis* (*History of the English*, c 1136-7), which he claims is based on English, Latin, and French sources, Gaimar writes of the cruelty of the Danish kings of England and the joy felt among the English once their own 'native' line is restored:

This caused great rejoicing among the English, since the Danes had treated them little better than serfs and often humiliated them. If a hundred Englishmen were to meet one lone Dane, woe betide them if they did not bow and scrape to him. And were they to come to a bridge, they would have had to wait, and woe betide them if they dared move before the Danes had crossed. And as he passed by, each one would have to bow and scrape, and anyone not doing so would be arrested and given an ignominious beating. This is the sort of subservience the English were kept in, and the Danes abused and humiliated them.<sup>24</sup>

In his depiction of the English bowing and scraping to the Danes in abject fear, Gaimar performs a neat trick of imposing onto the Danes some of the injustices and brutalities enacted by the Normans in their drive to subdue

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24 Geoffrey Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, 260-1.

the English after the Conquest. For the first five years of his reign, William attempted to merge Norman and English administrative and ecclesiastical institutions and contain opposition. In the early months of 1070, as he faced intense pressure from forces led by Danish forces in the north, William 'set out deliberately to destroy all means of livelihood throughout Yorkshire and the neighboring countryside, inflicting heavy losses and creating the conditions for starving and famine.'<sup>25</sup> According to David Walker, the Conqueror's policy and the king himself enacted a streak of 'unbridled savagery'.<sup>26</sup> Though Gaimar does make brief note of William's violence by dutifully reporting on his 'pacifying the country' primarily by 'plundering and leaving many towns in flames' around 1067-8,<sup>27</sup> eventually Norman sovereignty, led by William Rufus, offered England a kind of peace it had scarcely before enjoyed. William Rufus is able 'to dispense justice and enforce the law so effectively that no one was unlawfully deprived of what was his, and no free-born man in his kingdom was in distress or in need.'<sup>28</sup> For Gaimar, thanks to the Normans' successes at driving out the Danes, England was free to enjoy a period of unprecedented prosperity.

The real calumny, then, is reserved in Gaimar's *Estoire* for the Danes. Although Ian Short, the *Estoire's* most recent translator and editor, has argued that Gaimar's chronicle harbours 'pro-Danish sympathies', making room in the English historical record for Danish ancestry, Short's reading overstates the multiculturalist desire for reconciliation in Gaimar's *Estoire*. For Short, Gaimar 'was writing in support of a specific historico-political thesis of particular interest to inhabitants of the Danelaw', a thesis that may have served to legitimize Cnut's eventual succession.<sup>29</sup> Gaimar's ultimate aim, according to Short, was to assist newcomers by 'contributing to a form of multiculturalism that enabled the many different ethnicities that constituted English society to assimilate at their own pace and in their own time', allowing for a range of cultural allegiances 'on which to foster mutual understanding and respect, and peaceful cohabitation, between peoples of different cultures in Anglo-Norman England and beyond.'<sup>30</sup> In order to make this argument work, however, Short downplays some of the later sections of Gaimar's chronicle, which repeatedly lambast Danes in the most vituperative terms as evildoers making claims in England without right. Despite Gaimar's own acknowledgment elsewhere in the *Estoire* that Cnut explicitly desired to maintain the laws of Edgar, accepted

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25 Walker 1995, 27-8.

26 Walker 1995, 28.

27 Geoffrey Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, 291-3.

28 Geoffrey Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, 337.

29 Short 2009, 358.

30 Short 2009, xlix.

Christianity, made a pilgrimage to Rome, and generally seemed eager to get along with the English, such subtlety is not welcome in the *Estoire's* larger picture. This larger picture required the justification and triumph of the present order, where the Danes and the English are 'bitter enemies' and the English revel in having finally rid the land of their Danish overlords when Edward the Confessor ascends the throne.<sup>31</sup> Gaimar lays the invectives on thick: the Danes are 'foul heathens', an 'accursed people', 'Danish devils', 'dastardly', 'by disposition exceedingly evil', 'arrogant', and 'foreign dogs'.<sup>32</sup> Of course, earlier texts such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle had characterized the Danes as heathens, but compared with the degree of disparaging calumnia in 12<sup>th</sup>-century and later histories and romances, a text like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle appears rather objective when speaking of the Danes, calling them pagans and heathens but generally not going much further.

Gaimar stated that when Harthacnut, the last Danish king of England, died, the English rejoiced because 'they no longer wanted' to have Danes as their kings.<sup>33</sup> Yet, people of Scandinavian extraction had settled in large, potentially massive, numbers from the early-9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards, and Gaimar's depiction of two entirely separate people - the Danes, being violent feudal overlords, and the English, beaten and humiliated - is a gross exaggeration and oversimplification of a society with multiple ethnicities. We cannot assume that people of Scandinavian descent living in England or those of invading forces had a shared, singular identity; it was unsympathetic chroniclers who lumped them together as 'Danes'.<sup>34</sup> Between 1013, when Swein Forkbeard of Denmark invaded England and claimed the throne, and 1042, when Harthacnut died, England was essentially part of a vast Danish empire. While Gaimar portrays the reign of Danish kings as a time of English subjection, some regions of Anglo-Saxon England, notably the north and the east, in which Scandinavians settled in significant numbers, might not have shared Gaimar's opinion.<sup>35</sup> According to Kelly DeVries, by the late-9<sup>th</sup> century 'it would have been impossible to demand the removal of all Scandinavians from Anglo-Saxon England, for, in reality, Anglo-Saxon England had become Anglo-Scandinavian England.'<sup>36</sup> It was only in hindsight that medieval historians saw clear 'national' divisions between the English and the Danes

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31 Geoffrey Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, 163.

32 Geoffrey Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, 163-91.

33 Geoffrey Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, 261.

34 Viking war bands in the early Middle Ages were likely to have been of mixed ethnicities. See Hadley 2000, 306-9.

35 On Scandinavian settlement in England, see Hadley 2006, Abrams 2003, Kleinman 2003, DeVries 1999, Reynolds 1997, esp. 263-73, Turville-Petre 1996, Lawson 1993, Hart 1992, Stenton 1927.

36 DeVries 1999, 16-17.

during the Danish invasions in the early-11<sup>th</sup> century. Some influential English before the Conquest fought on the side of the Danes, and the English king Aethelred II (978-1013, 1014-6) used Scandinavians as soldiers.<sup>37</sup> It was not obvious that the Normans would subdue the English as totally as they were able to, nor was it obvious that the Norwegians would be defeated at Stamford Bridge; it was also possible that future Danish and Norwegian kings could submit their rights to the throne. Though Anglo-Norman writers vilified the Danes (a medieval catch-all term for Scandinavians) to an unprecedented degree in England, it is possible that many English would not have seen them as a marauding and violent people, an image that is still pervasive today.

As certain sections of Gaimar's history suggest, the textual record regarding Danes in England is not uniformly negative; however, the few texts that appear somewhat sympathetic to the Danes will often reveal their awareness of standard denunciations of them. One such case is the Middle English romance *Havelok the Dane* (c. 1280-1300), which has been cited as no less than a 'revisionist' history of the Viking settlement of northern England.<sup>38</sup> For Turville-Petre, *Havelok* offers a revisionist history of the Vikings in England because it depicts the Danes becoming part of the English national stock by conveying a sense of 'a society, a diversity of people together involved in the actions of just kings and faithless lords.'<sup>39</sup> Of the Middle English historical romances that take place in pre-Conquest England featuring Danes, *Havelok* is the only text that presents Scandinavians in England not as pagan invaders but as Christian tradesmen and settlers, as having had a productive impact on the native English, both high- and low-born, and on the English monarchy. This has led some critics to consider the romance as a reflection of the ethnic loyalties of the East Anglian populace, where *Havelok* was probably composed. Scott Kleinman has argued that the East Anglian populace desired to see their forebears as productive participants in the national story and as eventual settlers into the fabric of English identity, and that the English *Havelok* reflects a 'process of East Anglian history-building, a learned and literate enterprise that attempted to establish an identity for the region.'<sup>40</sup> While *Havelok the Dane* does potentially suggest a Lincolnshire or East Anglian community with a very different opinion of Scandinavians in England's past than other Matter of England romances, the romance remains an anomaly. Moreover, *Havelok* echoes the negative depictions of Danes that were common in chronicles and historical romances, suggesting an awareness of characterizations of the Danes

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37 Lawson 1993, 47.

38 Turville-Petre 1996, 151.

39 Turville-Petre 1996, 154.

40 Kleinman 2003, 249.

as violent evildoers, even if it uses this rhetoric as a way of showing how such characterizations are unfounded and unfair. Godrich, the treacherous Earl of Cornwall who has usurped Goldeborough, the rightful heir to the throne, employs a Gaimar-like anti-Danish rhetoric by casting the Danes as a foreign threat to a unified English community and as a threat to both individuals' and England's very existence. As the final, climactic battle nears, which Havelok fights to stake his rightful claim to rule England, Godrich rallies his troops and musters up their fighting spirit against Havelok's invading Danes by appealing to the English soldiers' and nobles' love of the homeland. Three of the charges that Godrich levels against Havelok and the Danes – the destruction of churches, the killing of wives and tearing apart of families, and the Danes as 'uten-laddes', or foreigners – are specifically challenged and proven false by the end of the romance:

Hwan he wore come, sket was þe erl yar  
Ageynes Denshe men to fare,  
And seyde "Lyþes nu, alle samen!  
Haue Ich gadred you for no gamen,  
But Ich wile seyden you for þi.  
Lokes hware here at Grimesbi  
His uten-laddes here comen,  
And haues nu þe priorie numen –  
Al that euere mithen he finde,  
He brenne kirkes and prestes binde;  
He strangleth monkes and nunnes baþe.  
Wat wile ye, frend, her-offe raþe?  
Yif he regne þus-gate longe,  
He moun us all ouer-gange –  
He moun vs alle quic henge or slo,  
Or þral maken and do ful wo,  
Or elles reue us ure liues  
And ure children and ure wiues<sup>41</sup>

Godrich's divisive strategy is to drum up patriotism via negative

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41 *Havelok*, ll. 2575-92.

[When he had come, eager was the earl to go against the Danes. He said, "Listen now, all! I have gathered you here not for play, but I will tell you why. Foreigners have come to Grimsby and captured the priory. Everything that they find, they will burn churches and bind priests and strangle both monks and nuns. Friends, what do you advise? If they reign over us, they may overcome us all, they may hang or kill us, or make us slaves and do great evil. Or else they may rob us of our lives, and the lives of our children and wives."]

stereotypes, casting the invading Danes as un-Christian, un-English bloodthirsty pagans bent on nothing less than total destruction of the English way of life, burning churches, desecrating the leaders of the Christian community, and turning the free English into subjects of a foreign, barbaric overlord. However, because a usurping traitor employs such a divisive strategy rather than a hero, this rhetoric in *Havelok* ultimately serves to undermine and nullify the usefulness of Godrich's xenophobic brand of nationalism. Godrich's anti-Danish imagery overlaps with that of Gaimar's: both call the Danes 'dogs' and both express an English desire to drive the Danes completely out of the land.<sup>42</sup>

Gaimar, as well as other 12<sup>th</sup>-century chroniclers such as William of Malmesbury<sup>43</sup> and Henry of Huntingdon,<sup>44</sup> offer a simplified picture of divisions in English society both before and after the Conquest, subsuming competing regional and ethnic identities under the vast rubrics of 'English', 'Dane', and 'Norman'. Robert Stein writes that for the chronicler William of Malmesbury

the conquest levels a diversity of peoples into a conqueror and a conquered, two *gentes* (peoples or nations or bloodlines) and two peoples only, each occupying the same space. The Celts, never treated seriously in William's narrative, disappear altogether. The Danes are described as merely temporary visitors even if they manage to install a king from time to time. The Mercians, Northumbrians, East Anglians, and the rest become by 1066 simply English.<sup>45</sup>

Reducing multiple, potentially competing identities into a single homogenous national group is characteristic not only of 12<sup>th</sup>-century England but of national peoples in general. Hardt and Negri have argued that a people's identity is constructed on an 'imaginary plane' that eliminates or hides differences via 'racial subordination and social purification'.<sup>46</sup> In the Middle Ages, diverse and often antagonistic populations with clashing interests provided a powerful incentive for political leaders and intellectuals to imagine a larger national English community.<sup>47</sup> Historical writing flourished

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42 For the references to 'dogs', see *Havelok*, l. 2596 and Geoffrey of Gaimar, *des Engleis*, p. 165. For the desire to drive Danes out of the land, see *Havelok*, l. 2599, Geoffrey of Gaimar, *des Engleis*, p. 261.

43 William writes of the separate 'nations' of English, Normans, and Danes (*History of the Kings of Britain*, 425).

44 Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 15.

45 Stein 1997, 98.

46 Hardt and Negri 2000, 103.

47 See Hahn 2001, 7.

in the 12<sup>th</sup> century primarily because it addressed the needs of scholars and their patrons who wished to consolidate and clarify the past as an English past that could serve as justification for the present order. On the writing of national history Schlomo Sand contends that it is 'not seriously meant to uncover past civilizations' but is written for 'the construction of a meta-identity and the political consolidation of the present'.<sup>48</sup> Although some living in the isles of Britain and Ireland remained 'defiantly conscious of being distinct peoples'<sup>49</sup> through the medieval period, there was a powerful drive among English writers to develop a sense of national solidarity despite the reality of distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. Medieval descent-myths were about political unity rather than social divisions. In the complex effort after the Conquest to re-imagine the English past as an Anglo-Norman past by giving Norman bloodlines and houses mythological histories within the larger frame of England's national story, the Danes were represented as illegitimate predecessors to William and the Norman kings who constantly threatened to disrupt this national mythology. The Conquest itself came to be blamed on the Danes; the opinion that their attacks had weakened the morality and morale of the Anglo-Saxons is one that can be attributed to historians as disparate as William of Malmesbury and David Hume.<sup>50</sup>

Despite DeVries' suggestion that Anglo-Scandinavian England would be a more appropriate description than Anglo-Saxon England, 12<sup>th</sup>-century historians writing on pre-Conquest England almost uniformly insist on sharp distinctions between English and Dane. In the chronicle of John of Worcester (c 1120), when King Aethelred died in 1016, St. Dunstan's prophetic words spoken at Aethelred's coronation were recounted, in which the Danish king Cnut was clearly referred to as a foreigner with totally alien customs and language: 'The sword shall not depart from thy house, but shall rage against thee all the days of thy life, cutting off thy seed, until thy kingdom become the kingdom of an alien, whose customs and tongue the nation which thou rulest knoweth not.'<sup>51</sup> Likewise, Matthew Paris, in his *History of Saint Edward the King* (c. 1230x40s), has King Aethelred call the Danes 'foreigners who have no rights here' in the same breath that he calls them 'greedy and warlike' as they

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48 Sand 2009, 248.

49 Reynolds 1997, 273.

50 Hume 1830, 198-9, writes that there 'were several vices in the Anglo-Saxon constitution, which rendered it difficult for the English to defend their liberties in so critical an emergency. The people had in a great measure lost all national pride and spirit, by their recent and long subjection to the Danes.' According to Hume, because Cnut governed them 'equitably' by their own laws, the English came to prefer subjugation to bloodshed, and this made them more susceptible to foreign conquest, unable 'to withstand the victorious arms of the Duke of Normandy.'

51 John of Worcester, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*, 126.

burn churches and slaughter women and children.<sup>52</sup> In John of Worcester's chronicle, all of the assembled nobles and clergy unanimously elect Cnut as king despite his being a foreigner. They swear allegiance to Cnut and in turn he promises to respect 'divine and secular affairs' and to 'be faithful to his duties as lord over them', but the citizens of London and some nobles choose Edmund Ironside as their king, which causes wars to break out between the warring factions. Although he is depicted in St. Dunstan's prophecy as a non-English other, Cnut is shown reforming his life and making a pilgrimage to Rome, distributing alms to the poor, abolishing tolls, and working for the 'good of the people'.<sup>53</sup> Cnut calls his people 'English, as well as Danes'.<sup>54</sup> Despite Harthacnut and Edward the Confessor being called 'brothers', in 1042 the Danish brother sends huscarls throughout the kingdom to collect tribute, plundering and destroying cities, while his English brother returns from Normandy and remains silent at court in the midst of the fighting. Edward is joyously proclaimed king when Harthacnut dies from a stumble as the pitiful result of too much drinking. Even as Gaimar and John of Worcester admit degrees of consanguinity and amiability between English and Dane, the end result is the same in both narratives: terror, subjection, plundering, and an overthrowing of rank and order while the Danes remain in power, with the Confessor as saviour and the Conqueror as his proper heir. The idea of England was built on such narratives of continuity and unity.

For historians writing in England wishing to reconcile English history with the Norman Conquest, along with the name-calling vilification of the Danes it became important to cast the Danes as lawless destroyers bent on anarchy, as opposed to the legitimate rule and civilized law enjoyed and protected by the English and then the Normans.<sup>55</sup> The early 12<sup>th</sup>-century history of England, the *Historia Anglorum* (c 1129-54), by an archdeacon in the diocese of Lincoln, Henry of Huntingdon, proposes a division of Anglo-British history along five lines of invasion and colonization, or what Henry calls the 'five plagues' sent by 'divine vengeance': the Romans, the Picts and Scots, the English, the Danes, and the Normans.<sup>56</sup> The plague of the Danes was 'more widespread and cruel than the others', however.<sup>57</sup> The four other incursions were brief (that of the Romans), localized (that of the Scots and Picts), or beneficial (that of the English). The English invasion was beneficial because after they gained

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52 Matthew Paris, *The History of Saint Edward the King*, 56.

53 John of Worcester, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*, 138.

54 John of Worcester, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*, 136-7.

55 For a discussion of Henry of Huntingdon and English identity after the Conquest, see Gillingham 2000, 123-44.

56 Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 15.

57 Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 272-3.

territory, they built upon it and established laws, civilizing the land, in the same way that the Normans later granted the conquered 'their life, liberty, and ancient laws'.<sup>58</sup> The Danes neither built nor established laws, combining the worst aspects (and were not brief and or localized) of the previous plagues. Unlike the English and the Normans, invaders who ultimately wished to civilize the land by establishing laws, the Danes 'swooped and rushed' over England 'not aiming to possess it but rather to plunder it, and desiring not to govern but rather to destroy everything.'<sup>59</sup> The Danes are opposed to being productive or allowing England to flourish. Instead, they constantly attempted to subject the English and instill fear by destroying everything in their path. Rather than settling, governing, or building upon the land as the Saxons and Normans did, the Danes violently seized the land and possessed it unlawfully. Henry's book headings are telling: whereas the book on the Romans is titled *De Regno Romanorum* ('On the Kingdom of the Romans') and the English and the Normans are titled *De Adventu Anglorum* and *De Adventu Normannorum* ('On the Coming of the English' and 'On the Coming of the Normans'), the book on the Danes is titled *De Bellis Dacorum* ('On the Danish Wars'). Henry of Huntingdon writes categorically that the Danes in England had completely disappeared: they 'conquered it by warfare, but afterwards, they perished' (*sed postea deperierunt*), soon followed by the Normans who still rule and 'have dominion over the English at the present time'.<sup>60</sup> There is no question of the settlement and assimilation of Scandinavians into the fabric of English society.<sup>61</sup> In Henry's account, the sole remainder from the invasions of the Danes is the Danegeld, a massive tribute that was originally paid to the Danes 'out of unspeakable fear', but which continues to be paid to the king 'out of custom'.<sup>62</sup> Henry thus echoes Gaimar in his association of the Danes with harsh overlordship and the promise of a glorious future once they disappear.

Three processes were essential to the literary production of the Danes as national enemies: first, delegitimization of Scandinavian claims to the kingship and land of England, coupled with denunciations of their role in the country's history; second, narratives that insisted on the total disappearance of Danes from England after the coronation of Edward the Confessor third, the vilification of them as a savage and cruel people. If the Danes could be effectively portrayed as antithetical to the very idea of the English – an idea

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58 Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 273.

59 Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 273.

60 Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 15.

61 For a comparison of Henry of Huntingdon's depiction of the Vikings with earlier chronicles, especially that of Aethelweard's, see Page 1986, esp. 14-20.

62 Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 329.

of a God-ordained, Christian people unified by religion, history, customs, laws, and language – then room was made for the Normans, successors to the proper Wessex line, to be seen as a boon to the realm. In his life of Edward the Confessor, Matthew Paris consistently makes clear distinctions between the native-born English and foreigners; at the same time, he valorizes not only Anglo-Saxon ancestry but the mixing of Norman and Anglo-Saxon blood in the person of Edward, favouring a model of hybridity in which his text grafts “the Norman ‘branch’ onto the Anglo-Saxon ‘root.’”<sup>63</sup> It is no surprise that in such a model, where the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons together forged a renewed England and a new sense of Englishness, the Danes are the true foreigners. Matthew Paris condemns Swein Forkbeard, king of England for about one month in 1013-4, for pursuing a ‘war of acquisition’ in England, coveting gold, attacking towns, plundering the land, burning churches, taking hostages, and breaking oaths, so that ‘the people fled before him and he scooped up and kept all their possessions.’<sup>64</sup> Swein’s evil nature is then ascribed to the Danes as a whole. They are ‘greedy and terrible’, warlike, immoral, killers of women and children ‘doing evil everywhere.’<sup>65</sup> An anonymous contemporary of Paris’s, writing his own life of Edward in Anglo-Norman (*La Estoire de Seint Aedward Le Rei*, c 1245), makes the English into the bearers of civilization and noble chivalry, a way of life that is threatened by the Danes, who are portrayed as an anarchic mob. Under Harthacnut, the Danes kill the nobles throughout England and the

rabble and low-fellows  
Get possession of their lands.<sup>66</sup>

The ravages of the Danes cause the overthrow of privilege, rank, and the proper hierarchy on which peaceful society is founded. Noble conquering is contrasted with ignoble conquering:

Sweyn and Cnut with their Danes  
Have slain the gentle English,  
Whose parents, whose ancestors  
Were noble conquerors:  
Coming in the company  
Of Brutus of the bold countenance<sup>67</sup>

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63 Fenster and Wogan-Browne 2008, 22.

64 Matthew Paris, *The History of Saint Edward*, 55.

65 Matthew Paris, *The History of Saint Edward*, 56.

66 *La Estoire de Seint Aedward Le Rei*, ll. 568-9.

67 *La Estoire de Seint Aedward Le Rei*, ll. 782-89.

The story of England is revised to make the English, not the Celtic Britons, the 'original' inhabitants of the island, descendants of the legendary Brutus. The English are portrayed as having conquered rightfully, and this noble conquering is aligned with Duke William, who is himself made to be a descendant of Brutus. When Duke William makes his claim to the English throne, his invasion is portrayed as just such a noble conquest, done by right, where casualties and brutalities are minimized and justification for the Conquest is highlighted. As opposed to the 'bastardy' (l. 770) that the Danes commit by murdering nobles, dismissing rank, and unseating the rightful sovereign, the Normans remedy this savagery and 'richly clothed [England] again with verdure', setting it back to right:

Now are king, now are barons  
And the kingdom, of a common blood  
Of England and Normandy.<sup>68</sup>

When the Danes, in Edward the Confessor's words 'our mortal enemy', have been totally ousted from England and Edward crowned king, the 'world is renewed' and 'summer arrived'.<sup>69</sup> Like the accounts of William of Poitiers and Henry of Huntingdon, the *Estoire de Seint Aedward* sketches the Conquest not as a conquest at all, but a setting to rights of English sovereignty after the unlawful and alien disruption of the Danish kings and Harold Godwinson. To post-Conquest historians like Matthew Paris and the writer of *La Estoire de Seint Aedward* and to the composers of Anglo-Norman and Middle English historical romances, portraying the Danes as the pursuers of injustice and the symbol of the misguided political philosophy of 'might is right' was a way of legitimizing and justifying the proper order of the monarchy, the nobility, and the Church, all of which were at least partly empowered by their connection with the past.<sup>70</sup>

The narrative of English and Norman cooperation and alliance and their mutual interest in fending off Danes was in the late-11<sup>th</sup> century a politically expedient narrative, which then became in 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century chronicles a means to laud and draw attention to a centralized English sovereignty with continuity from past to present. In the late-13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the romance form began to look to England's past, the Conquest was almost totally ignored in such romances in lieu of the invasions of the Danes, who became the prime enemy of the majority of Middle English historical romances about England's

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68 *La Estoire de Seint Aedward Le Rei*, l. 3835, ll. 3851-3.

69 *La Estoire de Seint Aedward Le Rei*, l. 1389.

70 Spiegel 1997, esp. 83-98.

past.<sup>71</sup> There was a reciprocal relationship between historical romances and more learned historical material, which began to incorporate elements from romances as history that could have happened. Later medieval and early modern historians did not always desire to determine the historical accuracy of an event so long as it was sufficiently edifying and seemed true enough to life. Francis Bacon used the term 'poesy historical' for the hybrid of history proper and the quasi-history of myth and legend; he understood that poetry and history work in tandem in crafting our notions of the past.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, John Milton praised the utility of legends about the British past that had emerged from the Middle Ages, especially concerning the legendary origins of Britain with its mythical founder Brutus, as containing the 'footprints of something true' even if not historically true.<sup>73</sup>

The legendary romance-hero Guy of Warwick serves as a useful example of the porous borders between romance-history and history proper in the later Middle Ages. From the early-14<sup>th</sup> century onwards in histories as varied as Robert Mannyng's *Chronicle* (c 1330) and Holinshed's chronicle over two hundred years later, Guy is sometimes included as King Aethelstan's champion against invading Danes – a climactic episode culled from his Anglo-Norman (*Gui de Warewic*, c 1220) and Middle English (*Guy of Warwick*, c 1330) romances. Although Mannyng is at times sceptical of the authenticity of some questionably historical figures, he incorporates Guy with no hesitation. Mannyng includes Guy at the year 940 in his chronicle with no suggestion that Guy is a figure of romance. Though Mannyng in other sections of his chronicle draws a sharp line between proper history and romance-history, Guy was apparently a real enough figure of history to merit mention without hesitation. God sends Aethelstan a champion to defeat the Danes' giant:

þat was Guy of Werwik as þe boke sais;  
þer he slouh Colibrant with hache Daneis.  
Anlaf turned agayn (I trowe him was wo),  
He & alle his to schippe gan þei go.<sup>74</sup>

Whereas the story of Havelok, as Mannyng tells us, cannot be found in Gildas, Bede, Henry of Huntingdon, William of Malmesbury, or Peter de

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71 For discussions of identity in Middle English romance, see Cannon 2008, Cohen 2006, Stein 2006, Heng 2003, Hardman 2002, Ingham 2001, Field 2000, Turville-Petre 1999.

72 Cited in Ferguson 1993, 127.

73 Cited in Ferguson 1993, 103.

74 Robert Mannyng, *The Chronicle*, ll. 697-700. This work is largely an English translation of Peter de Langtoft's Anglo-Norman verse *Chronicle* (c 1305), which is itself a re-working of Wace's *Brut*, Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*, and other sources.

[That was Guy of Warwick, as the book says. There he slew Colebrant with his Danes. Anlaf turned back (I believe he was sad); he and all his men went to their ships.]

Langtoft (ll. 521-2), Mannyng relates Guy's story as *pe boke sais*. The appearance of Guy in an appropriate historiographical source (Peter de Langtoft's Anglo-Norman verse *Chronicle*, c 1305) is enough evidence for Mannyng to accept the legendary knight as a figure of history. After the 14<sup>th</sup> century Guy's defeat of Colbrand and his role as England's saviour against the Danes his existence appears to have been accepted as historical truth. The major fourteenth- and fifteenth-century histories (Gerald of Cornwall, Rudborne, Knighton, Hardyng, Rous) include Guy's fight against the Danes and their giant Colbrand, so it was clearly an accepted truth and was repeatedly recounted as an historical event.<sup>75</sup> Chroniclers and antiquarians of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were no less interested in Guy; the popular chroniclers Fabyan, Grafton, Holinshed, and Stow all recounted how Guy at the request of Aethelstan saved England from the Danes by defeating the giant Colbrand.<sup>76</sup> Guy's victory was not a romance at all, but a genuine historical event of which all English people could be proud. Romance and history intertwined in the later medieval and early modern periods to create a sense of English identity across past and present, and, with very few exceptions, the defeat of the Danes was a key element of this process of identity creation.<sup>77</sup>

### The 'Absent Presence' of the Danes

The complete removal of Danes from England, whether by heroic English military triumph (in romance narratives) or Edward the Confessor's restoration of the Wessex line (in chronicle accounts) became the archetypal medieval and early modern model of England before the Conquest. Henry of Huntingdon's statement that the Danes in England completely disappeared after losing the throne in 1042 may be inaccurate given the reality of settlement and assimilation, but it is accurate in a different, more abstract, sense. The Danes and Scandinavian culture in general did indeed 'disappear' from England as the pressures to assimilate and adopt their English neighbours' customs, language, religion, and laws superseded the conservation of strong ethnic affiliations. Yet assimilation was not the narrative that was told of the Danes in England by the vast majority of medieval texts. They were written out of the story of the English people and written out of England's history, while episodes boasting of the English trouncing invading Danes became a pervasive literary theme through the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As a literary production the Danes in England were consistently deployed as the un-English arbiters

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75 Crane 1915, 127.

76 Crane 1915, 135.

77 Field 1991.

of injustice and intolerance, the very thing that needed to be ousted from England if it was to consider itself an ideal national community. In this sense, the Jews in England serve as a profitable comparison with the Danes. Expelled by Edward I in 1290 after two centuries of widespread anti-Semitic feelings, it was illegal to be an openly practicing Jew in England until a provisional right of return was passed under Cromwell in 1656. Nevertheless, in the absence of real Jews after 1290 there existed (according to Sylvia Tomasch) the 'virtual Jew' who existed in a kind of 'absent presence', there but not there.<sup>78</sup> Although openly practicing Jews were not permitted to reside in England, late medieval literature, especially devotional material, was rife with images of Jews.<sup>79</sup> But the Jews are not merely images of alterity, simplified others. Following Denise Despres, Colin Richmond, and James Shapiro, Tomasch argues that the Jew was central to 'the construction of Englishness itself' in the late Middle Ages.<sup>80</sup> Shapiro writes that 'between 1290 and 1656 the English came to see their country defined in part by the fact that Jews had been banished from it.'<sup>81</sup> For Tomasch, the Jew is an 'enduring sign' that marks 'the persistence of colonialism in England' from the 13<sup>th</sup> into the 14<sup>th</sup> century as the colonizing subjects, the English, employed the Jew as part of their 'colonialist program'.<sup>82</sup> In medieval English writing it was as if the Jews were expelled over and over again as Christianity expressed a need to preserve Jews. For medieval Christians, Judaism was a 'disavowed heritage', clearly 'made into that which was definitively past'; but this was 'a past that (spectrally) inhabits the present.'<sup>83</sup>

Similar to the Danes in the English past, the very definition of a good society came to be one in which there were no Jews. The construction of Englishness was vital to some medieval writers' conceptions of the good, Christian society; defining Englishness as embodying certain values at the expense of those it has expelled was key to Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale* (to borrow one of Tomasch's examples), where the Jewish presence and their actions pollute Asia, which is implicitly contrasted with a purified England 'whose sanitized state is founded on the displacement of the Jews'.<sup>84</sup> Thus while actual (openly practicing) Jews may have been eliminated from England, the 'virtual Jew' subsisted in a kind of absent presence. The Danes' 'disappearance' from England was a two-fold process: on the one hand they were pressured

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78 Tomasch 2000, 243.

79 Tomasch 2000, 243.

80 Tomasch 2000, 244.

81 Shapiro 1996, 42.

82 Tomasch 2000, 244.

83 Kruger 2006, 29.

84 Tomasch 2000, 248.

to assimilate as an increasingly homogenous English identity, subsuming competing ethnic identities, developed through the twelfth century; and on the other hand, they were consistently deployed by historical writers as ‘virtual Danes’, there only to be defeated. In this sense both the Jew and the Dane played similar roles in late medieval English writing, positioned to reflect a purified and whole English body.

That the Danes were conjured in the late medieval and early modern periods as shape shifting, spectral enemies is well illustrated by *The Three Laws of Nature, Moses, and Christ* (1538), a play by the evangelical polemicist and bishop John Bale. In a dispute between the characters Evangelium and Infidelitas over true and false faiths, Evangelium assures Infidelitas that there are those in ‘all countries’ whose faith is grounded solely on ‘the hard rock, Christ’, as opposed to ‘disguised hypocrites, / Of apish shavelings, or papistical sodomites.’ Infidelitas responds, in a non sequitur that confuses Evangelium, by evoking the Danes:

*Infid.* Their number is such as hath run over all;

The same Danes are they men prophesy of, plain,  
Which should overrun this realm yet once again.

*Evang.* What Danes speakest thou of? Thy meaning show more clearly.

*Infid.* Dane John, Dane Robert, Dane Thomas, and Dane Harry:

These same are those Danes that lay with other men’s wives;  
And occupied their lands, to the detriment of their lives.<sup>85</sup>

Infidelitas begins the passage by referring to the true believers suggested by Evangelium, warning that they will overtake the land like the Danes of old. Infidelitas’s pun relies on a confusion of “Dane” with “Dan,” a common title for a cleric. Two recurrent themes are on display here: the barbarous Danes running rampant over England and lecherous Catholic clergy running rampant over English wives. Infidelitas conflates the ‘historical’ Danes, rampaging and destroying England, with Catholic friars, fornicating with married women. In 1416, at the Coventry Hocktide pageantries, the Danes were enemies cast to continuously prove the worth and strength of the English; in 1538, we see them being re-cast as licentious clerics. The trick Infidelitas pulls is that he is calling Protestants of ‘the true Church militant’, not ‘papistical sodomites’,<sup>86</sup> Danes. In short, the Danes are marauding Protestants ruining the ‘lives’ and ‘wives’ of the English. Meant to be sarcastic in tone, in the mouth of an infidel to the Protestant cause, Catholic clerics (‘Dans’) have become Protestant Danes,

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85 Bale, *The Three Laws of Nature*, 49-50.

86 Bale, *The Three Laws of Nature*, 49.

committing the infidelities for which Bale is ultimately criticizing Catholic clergymen. The Danes were spectral shape shifters, ready to be conjured out of the past for the needs of the present.

## Conclusion

For the medieval writer of history, the past and the present were engaged in a symbiotic relationship. The past helped to shape the present and the quest for the past was conducted according to present needs. As Gabrielle Spiegel shows, the medieval use of the past was a fruitful enterprise; because the past was so obscure in any critical sense, it could become a 'vehicle for change'. Spiegel writes, 'All that was needed was to recreate [the past] in the image of the present and then claim its authority for the legitimation of contemporary practices'.<sup>87</sup> The past served not only as a moral model to teach people how to live, but as a storehouse for a legacy of national memories where the construction of a national identity was formed and developed.

The Danes were vital to the process of English identity formation in post-Conquest and early modern England. When Edmund Spenser surveyed the Isles' landscape, he found stories of 'Daneraths', or hills of the Danes, 'devised, not for treaties and parlies, but appointed as fortes for them to gather unto, in troublesome time.'<sup>88</sup> Through the early modern period, the Danes were deployed as a barometer of the worth of local heroes. There is evidence from many communities across Britain relating tales of bravery and strength against the incursions of the barbarous Danes, and if a monument of some kind could be associated with the tale, the imagined tradition was all the more likely to endure. Thus in Sherston near Malmesbury, where a famous battle had taken place between Cnut and Edmund Ironside in 1016, a tale was engendered of one Rattlebone who 'did much service against the Danes', and a little statue above the church porch was claimed as an effigy for the English hero.<sup>89</sup> But the effigy was merely a 15<sup>th</sup>-century statue of some churchman. Entire towns would locate the origins of their name in the time of the Danes to give them a little historical sheen. Inhabitants of the city of Manchester in the 16<sup>th</sup> century claimed that their city's name supposedly ('City of Men') derived from the hardy resistance of their ancestors against the Danes,<sup>90</sup> and many towns across England in the early modern period were able to point to a spot where its local people had given the Danes a run for their money.<sup>91</sup> The people relating

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87 Spiegel 1997, 85-6.

88 Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, 79.

89 Fox 2000, 245-6.

90 Woolf 1991, 173.

91 Fox 2000, 246.

such stories of daring heroism and plucky survival may have been handing down tradition, but such traditions are more likely to have derived from texts creating and shaping them than from a popular, orally transmitted historical consciousness. When early modern antiquarians went looking for popular memory, what they found was a culture that had absorbed and delighted in medieval writing. After having been an unfailing means of explaining so many English popular customs in the later medieval and early modern periods, attributing the Danes to any landmark, monument, geographical feature, or custom (such as Hocktide) to buff its historical significance declines in frequency and popularity after the 16<sup>th</sup> century. England had new enemies with which to contend, and the desire to glorify English heroes against pagans was no longer relevant. The Danes as England's predominant historical enemy became nothing more than an antiquated tradition.

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