

CHAPTER I

*Introduction: Region and Nation in England's
North–South Divide*

Near Lamesley, UK, where Durham Road intersects with the A1, the largest sculpture in Britain stares southeast down the motorway. Built of 200 tons of steel and sitting atop the old Team Valley colliery pithead baths in order to honor mineworkers, the Angel of the North welcomes motorists to Gateshead just before they might veer northeast to Newcastle or remain on the A1 and travel all the way to Berwick. Artist Antony Gormley designed the sculpture, which was erected in February 1998, but the Angel's beginnings were contentious. While its emplacement was championed by the local council as a sign of the region's productive turn from old industry to the information age, even today, as a "catalyst to the cultural regeneration of Gateshead Quays," it was also parodied as the "Gateshead Flasher" for its outstretched wings¹ and, further, derided as a "potential death trap for passing motorists," who might be distracted by its substantial height (20 m or 54 ft) or the massive span (54 m or 175 ft) of those wings.² For this threat, Gormley recalled, in an interview, that some critics labeled it "Hell's Angel" or the "Angel of Death."³ Yet the sculpture has become a beloved icon of the region. As Martin Roberts claims in his recent survey of County Durham architecture, the Angel of the North as a community project "posed the greatest risk yet delivered the greatest reward" and it is further revered as a daring work of art.⁴ Given its existence as both a damning image and a salvific icon of the region, the Angel of the North proves a fitting point of departure for this book's examination of the origins of northern consciousness and the English North–South divide. The hulking steel giant that is Gateshead's Angel, called by some the largest angel sculpture in the world, has a fitting precursor in medieval biblical typology.

In Passus 1 of the C-text of *Piers Plowman* the radical fourteenth-century poet and preacher William Langland offers a joke on the North of England. The dreamer asks:

Lord! why wolde he tho, þat wykkede Lucifer,
 Luppen alofte in þe north syde
 Thenne sitten in þe sonne (sun's) syde Pere þe day roweth?
(111–13)⁵

This passage specifically alludes to *Isaiah 14*, which imagines the return of exiles from Babylonian captivity and also satirises the fall of their oppressors, comparing Babylonian rulers to the fallen angel, Lucifer himself. Verse 13, to which Langland refers here, recalls the rebellious Lucifer's arrogant claims: "*in caelum conscendam super astra Dei axaltabo solium meum sedebo in monte testament in lateribus*" (I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit in the mountain of the covenant, in the sides of the north). In the context of Lucifer's proclamations, *Piers Plowman's* dreamer asks, in effect, "why would that wicked Lucifer take up his seat in the North?" Lady Holy Church responds to the dreamer playfully: "Ne were it for northerne men a-non ich wolde telle" (115). While evoking a patristic aspect of northern-ness in medieval theology – that is, the North as the space wherein we find the Devil, Lucifer, at his most defiant – Langland acknowledges a second view of the North more closely akin to the cultural and political landscapes of England. Lady Holy Church's joke – that she will pass over any further explanation of diabolic northern-ness so as not to offend England's northerners ("Ne were it for northerne men. . .") – is extended playfully and purposefully in the lines that follow. She continues: "Hit is sykerer by soothe where the sonne regneth / Than in the north by meny notes, all men know" (116–17). For Lady Holy Church, the South is more desirable than the North because the sun reigns there in its warmth (*sonne regneth*) and, by allusion, Christ (the *sonne*) reigns there in his glory.⁶ Beyond these reasons are "meny notes" more. It is, thus, quite possible to hear in Langland's allusion a sarcasm born of the North–South divide: that his readers, fellow non-northerners – and, more specifically, the Londoners in whose circles Langland moved – know exactly why one would place Lucifer in the culturally-backward and often-rebellious frontier of the North of England rather than in the South, where it is safer (*sykerer*).

Although he represses any explicit desire for the North in his disparaging humor, Langland nonetheless intimates his own awareness of the region's complex character as both derided *and* desired throughout

England's political and cultural history. In a Latin declarative that precedes these lines in the C-text, Langland quotes Augustine's own exegetical reading of *Isaiah 14*: "*Ponam pedem meum in aquiline, et ero similis altissimo*" (I will put my foot in the North and I will be like the Most High).⁷ This particular note, from which Langland quotes, is part of Augustine's long discussion on the coming together of Jews and Gentiles as two mountains flanking Zion or, per *Psalms 118:22*, as two walls that meet at the cornerstone of Christ in order to form the new Zion. In Augustine's explanation, the "North" signifies anyone possessed by the Devil ("serving images, adoring demons") because "North," here, signifies Lucifer. Augustine explains, "The North is wont to be contrary to [Z]ion: [Z]ion forsooth is in the South, the North over against the South," for, he continues, "Who is the North, but He who said, *I will sit in the sides of the North, I will be like the Most High*?"⁸ But as Lucifer's monstrations imply, he aims to take the place of God, to "be like" God, and that place is *in* the North. Yet, he will fail in his rebellion. Lady Holy Church notes that "as the fend fleght to set his foot there / He faileth and fell and his felawes with him" (1119–20). Indeed, Augustine finds in *Job 37:22* that God will re-inscribe the North as his own domain: "Therefore also in another Scripture is it said, *Out of the North come clouds of golden colour: great is the glory and honour of the Almighty*" (editor's emphasis). For Augustine, then, the North is that place of God that has been usurped by the Devil, but it will be remade through the forthcoming return of the Almighty. On His return, God will descend from the North, illuminating the bleak clouds with gold, undoing the Devil's work through His own presence and in His own likeness: "and the sides of the North will be joined to the city of the great king." The image of two walls coming together in this biblical typology is compelling for thinking about the English nation with its North–South divide. The biblical North provokes both disdain and longing, a place both frightening through Lucifer's presence and his rebellion against God, and yet intimate in Christ's salvific return. Thus, we can understand how Augustine's exegesis explains the duality of the North for medieval English writers. Langland's clever use of *Isaiah 14:13* in the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, with its winking nod to Augustine's theology and all in a regionalist frame, captures the complex nature of the North as both destructive and salvific. Langland's contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer, will play upon this typology in the *Friar's Tale* with a devil-in-disguise who claims to be from "fer in the north contree" (III, 1413) and who rids the local population of a criminous summoner.⁹

In medieval England, the North is not simply “other”; rather, the broad region comprises a liminal space, both within and without a national frame. In the North, English national identity confronts strong regional cultures and politics. Anxiety stemming from the North’s haunting presence is not merely the product of southern-derived stereotypes and superstitions. As Dave Russell notes, scholarship on the North–South divide “often underestimates the extent to which the region has been active in its own making.”¹⁰ Numerous rebellions by northerners against the crown and its South-centered government contribute to a negative northern consciousness and provoke negative characterizations of the region in literature and culture. In 1069, for example, the northern populace aligned with King Swein II of Denmark and the exiled English claimant to the throne, Edgar Ætheling, in order to rebel against the new Norman ruler, William I (the Conqueror). The revolt elicited from William a crushing military response, the “Harrying of the North,” in the winter of 1069–70 that set the region back for decades. In 1214, northern barons refused to fight in King John’s Poitevin campaign, and these men later brought the monarch to the table at Runnymede to sign Magna Carta. Late historian J.C. Holt captures the regional identity of these men in the title of his study on the period, *The Northerners*.¹¹ In the early fourteenth century, Richard II cultivated the powerful marcher families of the North, including the Percys, Cliffords, and Nevilles, in order to systematically address the Scottish threat, but in 1399 these wardens of the march assisted in Richard’s overthrow. Almost as quickly, the Percys rebelled against Henry IV before the younger Percy (Hotspur) met his fate at the Battle of Shrewsbury in 1403. Beyond these major revolts, the North has always evoked suspicion and derision from non-northerners. To many Englishmen who lived and thrived elsewhere, the North of England loomed as a cultural and political bogeyman over the rest of the realm for much of the Middle Ages. Unlike the Irish, the Welsh, and even the Scots, northerners remained within the borders of England while at the same time far-flung from the ideological heart of the realm in the South.¹²

At the same time, we cannot paint the North of England solely as a region of rebellion and angst against the crown and its government. The North was a staging ground for English historical writing and religious devotional life, as well as a central factor in English politics and national defense. The remote monastery of St Peter’s at Jarrow was home to the Venerable Bede, the “Father of English History,” whose eighth-century *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* became the touchstone for later historiographers writing their revisions of English history after the

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Norman Conquest. Northern devotional practice, including Cistercian monasticism or the affective piety described in the writings of celebrated hermit Richard Rolle of Hampole, were profoundly popular and influential throughout England in the Middle Ages. The Lindisfarne monk Cuthbert (634–687 CE) was England's preeminent saint and his shrine at Durham arguably the most visited pilgrimage site in England up until the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in 1170.¹³ From the 1160s, Cuthbert's banner was carried by an array of peoples and, with the advent of the Anglo-Scottish wars in 1296, the banner proved "a vital talisman accompanying English campaigns against the Scots."¹⁴ This was never more evident than when, in 1346, it was marched into the fray against the Scots at Neville's Cross, just outside Durham. There, an army of local levies led by the Archbishop of York, William le Zouche, defeated the Scottish army of King David II, who was captured during the battle. This victory was a significant national moment that erased, at least briefly, years of Scottish military success against the English. King Edward III clarified this erasure when he ordered Scotland to pay David's ransom annually on 24 June, the anniversary of the Scottish victory at Bannockburn in 1314.¹⁵

In this long war, England's second city, York, became an intermittent capital, wherein one might find the royal household, the exchequer, the chancery, and parliament from the late thirteenth century to the end of the fourteenth century. Indeed, Richard II moved the government to York in 1392–3 for the express purpose of spiting London. Given the convoluted relationship of the North to the rest of the realm as either a seat for rebellion or the seat of the king, we are not surprised that William Langland found a parallel in the imagery of *Isaiah 14*. The present study proposes to analyze the complexities of northern consciousness extant in the literature of medieval England, wherein we witness the North–South divide with its interplay of regionalism and nationalism.

In spite of abundant evidence of a North–South divide extant in – or, arguably, emerging in – medieval England, most discussions of the great rift see the Industrial Revolution as a definitive point of origin. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), George Orwell declares confidently that "it was the industrialization of the North that gave the North–South antithesis its peculiar slant."¹⁶ One would imagine that Orwell's views are shaped in part by the Victorian novels that bore witness to the Industrial Revolution in England, the most famous of which are Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855). In *Sybil*, Disraeli posits a distinct division between rich and poor "who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if

they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets” (BK 2, Ch. 2), but the book’s focus on the industrial North unquestionably broaches a geographic divide – truly “dwellers in different zones” – between the North and South. Gaskell’s novel is more explicit. Her heroine, Margaret Hale, begins the novel as a lady-in-training at the London home of her wealthy aunt before moving back to her beloved cottage in the rural hamlet of Helstone, by the New Forest in Hampshire. Her world is upended quickly when her father moves both she and her mother to the industrial muck of the northern town Milton (a fictionalized version of Manchester), where she is made to confront the awful conditions and the tragedies of the northern poor in the face of exploitive labor. While Gaskell was gravely concerned over the plight of industrial workers, as her previous novels *Mary Barton* (1848) and the scandalous *Ruth* (1853) expressed, it was her editor Charles Dickens, at the magazine *Household Words* in which Gaskell published the novel in serial, who suggested the title *North and South*.¹⁷ These works illustrate the cultural and economic differences between industrial North and agrarian South and accentuate the impact of the Industrial Revolution on England from the late eighteenth century.

Scholars have tended to follow Orwell’s lead in declaring the Industrial Revolution as a root cause of the divide. Sociologist Rob Shields points specifically to the work of Disraeli and Gaskell when he claims:

The contemporary dichotomous North and South view came into focus with nineteenth-century literary works which responded to the rapid industrialization of the North (and the emergence of an urbanized industrial elite which challenged the social status of the landed aristocracy largely centered in the Home Counties around London).¹⁸

Shields arguments are echoed in recent examinations of the North–South divide by other sociologists, historians, and literary scholars. Dave Russell’s *Looking North* and Neville Kirk’s essay collection *Northern Identities* focus almost exclusively on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, analyzing various examples of music, stage and film, sport, tourism, and language that proffer and affirm the North’s discrete identity within England.¹⁹ Remarkably, even when scholars have attended to the North–South divide before the Industrial Age, they find it difficult to admit the rift’s cultural or political prominence. Allan Baker and Mark Billinge’s essay collection *Geographies of England: The North–South Divide, Material and Imagined* traces the division backwards from the present day to the Norman Invasion of 1066. Historian Bruce M.S. Campbell, whose contribution

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analyzes the medieval period from 1066 to 1550, acknowledges that in the Middle Ages “differences between the North and South are not hard to find,” but he questions whether these differences really divided the realm. He argues that by the thirteenth century, “there is nothing to suggest that there was any contemporary concept of a “North-South divide””; rather, the period is notable for the “emergence of a growing sense of national consciousness, which overrode older regional identities.”²⁰ While Campbell is right to view the period as one of emergent nationalism, his conclusion—that “the one North–South divide that was as real as it was imagined was that between England and Scotland” – fails to account for the ways in which the tenuous relationship between the North and the rest of the England informs, if not enables, the emergence of a national consciousness in the period. If we return briefly to Orwell, we recognize that such modern commentaries on industrialization and the North–South divide betray medieval foundations. Orwell, for example, observes:

when you go to the industrial North you are conscious, quite apart from the unfamiliar scenery, of entering a strange country. This is partly because of certain real differences which do exist, but still more because of the North–South antithesis which has been rubbed into us for such a long time past The Northerner has “grit,” he is grim, “dour,” plucky, warm-hearted, and democratic; the Southerner is snobbish, effeminate, and lazy – that at any rate is the theory. Hence, the Southerner goes north . . . for the first time, with the vague inferiority-complex of a civilised man venturing among savages, while the Yorkshireman, like the Scotchman, comes to London in the spirit of a barbarian out for loot. And feelings of this kind, which are the result of tradition, are not affected by visible facts.²¹

Orwell speaks, here, of a cultural inertia that continues to inform representations of the North and an understanding of the divide in the present. His “long time past,” however, is far longer than he might recognize because his allusion to “savages” and to the “spirit of a barbarian out for loot,” as well as his juxtaposition of the “Yorkshireman” with the “Scotchman,” betray premodern anxieties and recall disparaging remarks made by southern writers as far back as the twelfth century about the “strange country” north of the Humber, with its barbarous tongue and rebellious people.

The present study seeks to add to long-running conversations about the English North by attending to a perceived North–South divide, and, specifically, to examples of northern consciousness, in premodern England. In the pages that follow, I will argue, in part, that the North–South divide was a central point of tension in premodern England and that

northern consciousness is, in fact, a necessary condition for an emergent English national consciousness in the Middle Ages. Such inquiry, of course, risks falling into what Patricia Yeager has called the “dead-end binarism” that undermines cultural studies.²² Indeed, northern England – whether one now locates this region above the River Trent, the Humber Estuary, or even Watford Gap – is a heterogeneous space, and so it was in medieval England. York was not Carlisle and to hail from Holderness was not to hail from Newcastle; rather, we find a multiplicity of identities including the legal palatinates in Cheshire and Durham, the duchy of Lancaster, the border fortress at Berwick, all of which maintain significant – and different – political personas and a distinct consciousness of place. But what emerges nevertheless is that the broader region’s many spaces, places, and peoples are reproduced frequently in monochrome – “THE North” – at the surface-level of medieval literature. Yeager claims that “materiality is not just solid but also imaginary – that place only persuades us because it is made out of reiterated stories and objects that produce a constant, pervasive sense of locatability.”²³ My task in this study is to understand the cultural politics informing popular reiterations of a North–South divide in premodern England, while, at the same time, I analyze how this reductionist logic betrays far more complex relationships that move beyond a center–periphery model, deeper desires and derisions tied to imagining a greater English collective, an English nation.

What is Nation?

The question of a North–South divide in the Middle Ages is crucial to scholarly debate concerning a medieval English nation. For over twenty years, historians and literary critics have sought and debated forms of medieval nationhood. There has been an almost rhythmic strain to scholarly work in medieval literary studies since Thorlac-Turville Petre’s *England the Nation* was published in 1996. Michelle Warren’s *History on the Edge* (2000), Patricia Clare Ingham’s *Sovereign Fantasies* (2001), Geraldine Heng’s *Empire of Magic* (2003), Kathy Lavezzo’s *Angels on the Edge of the World* (2006), Robert Barrett’s *Against All England* (2008), Ardis Butterfield’s *The Familiar Enemy* (2009), Randy P. Schiff’s *Revivalist Fantasy* (2011), Lynn Staley’s *The Island Garden* (2012), and Susan Nakely’s *Living in the Future* (2017) have all contributed wonderfully compelling arguments on the relationships between medieval authors and English identity, as well as medieval concepts of nation. These books have often contested Benedict Anderson’s view that the nation-state

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emerges only in the sixteenth century and that it is largely a modern phenomenon. Anderson's view irks medievalists because it speaks to a larger sentiment, at least, about medieval Europe. This involves, as Andrea Ruddick explains

the claim that medieval people were unable to think in terms of the nation, because the medieval mind (itself a questionable concept) was dominated by submission to the universal Catholic Church, on the one hand, and by provincial loyalties, on the other. In addition, features of the modern states, such as a defined territory, widespread political participation and a commercialised economy are deemed to have been absent or underdeveloped in medieval kingdoms and other political entities.²⁴

But medievalists have been quick to distinguish their own discussions of medieval nations from modern ones. Ruddick continues, "This refusal to draw straight lines from medieval ideas about nationhood to modern nationalisms has been accomplished by a conviction that national identity in the middle ages needs to be investigated on its own terms, rather than trying to shoehorn medieval concepts of nationhood into modernists definitions."²⁵ As far back as 1984, Susan Reynolds qualified Anderson's then-recent arguments: "The trouble about all this for the medieval historian is not that the idea of the permanent and objectively real nation is foreign to the middle ages, as so many historians of nationalism assume, but that it closely resembles the medieval idea of the kingdom as comprising a people with a similarly permanent and objective reality."²⁶ R.R. Davies built on Reynolds work in one of his last essays, arguing that medieval England's "self-identification as a separate and unified people, its 'regnal solidarity' as a tightly-textured kingdom, and its effective cultivation of its own historical mythology . . . were woven tightly together to create a credible 'nation state'."²⁷ Even the concept of the *regnum* is compelling, in its political use, for medieval concepts of nation. As Ruddick's recent study shows, this term was deployed in the government discourse of the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to refer to England rather than the expanse of all English-held territory.²⁸

It is clear then: if Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" of nations seems to exclude the Middle Ages, then it has offered nevertheless astounding utility for critical demonstrations of nationalism in medieval texts and cultures.²⁹ Heng explains, "[k]ey to the notion of an imagined community . . . is self-identification by a national grouping . . . against large communities of others in oppositional confrontations over territory, political jurisdiction and dominion, and in warfare."³⁰ Such large-scale

identification is evident in Lavezzo's *Angels on the Edge of the World*, which illustrates how English writers and cartographers across the Middle Ages “actively participated in the construction of England as a global borderland,” and, in so doing, employed England’s “geographic remoteness” as a “means to articulate national fantasy.”³¹ Similarly, Staley's *Island Garden* relates the complexity of communitarian fantasy in her exploration of England’s “language of place,” one deeply pervaded by the concept of “enclosure” and, in particular, England as an island territory set against the world.³² In this formulation, as Staley demonstrates through numerous literary examples, the island of Britain was made to denote “England.” In her recent study of the *Canterbury Tales*, Nakely contends that “as a formation, the nation depends upon internationalism, the expression of relation between comparable but discrete political and cultural groups.”³³ And Nakely echoes Butterfield, who, in her own engagement with Chaucer and the nation, finds “[i]f on the French side of nationhood we need to consider the fluidity of territorial acquisition and loss on the continent, on the English side we need to take account of the relations between England and the rest of the peoples of Britain, the Scots, the Irish, and the Welsh.”³⁴ The English nation is best imagined when the realm is set against rival political territories in contestations and negotiations of geography, economy, and religion.

A medieval English nation emerges, however, not only in terms of “England versus the world”; nation is a concept deployed as well to overwrite internal differences. For Davies, England overcomes foreign invasion, civil strife, and a remarkable conflation of different peoples (Angle, Saxon, Jute, Dane, Norman, Fleming, and more) with what he calls “civic ethnicity” – a term similar to Reynolds’ “regal solidarity.” For Davies, this is the broad acceptance of common rule and allegiance to a single king.³⁵ Turville-Petre posits that “[c]oncepts of nationhood become dominant when the nation is perceived to be under threat from outside attack or influence,” but that they are asserted even more “when the nation is tearing itself apart” and, thus, when “national unity is the good that can be set against the evil of internal strife, of brother against brother.”³⁶ Ingham, for example, looks to England’s “celtic fringe,” the Welsh marches, in order to argue that “medieval community is imagined not through homogenous stories of a singular ‘people,’ but through narratives of sovereignty as a negotiation of differences, of ethnicity, region, language, class, and gender.”³⁷ Thus, she finds that concepts of nation were necessary for covering over “psychic and political instabilities” in a national collective.³⁸ Attention to particular moments of internal conflict provokes