



Narrative Rivalry of Richard the Lionheart and Sultan Saladin

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Introduction

Impartial discourse on fake news is hard to come by because it becomes so emotional. The distant past can provide the emotional distance in a way that even fiction and recent history cannot offer. What will be examined is a crude crusader epic called *Richard Coeur de Lion*, an English poem that tells the story of Richard the Lionheart's battles against his counterpart Sultan Saladin during the Third Crusade (1189-1192). A careful look at the details reveals that the poem follows the older mold of Alexander the Great's conquests of the Persian Empire--showcasing that the creation of false narratives is not random but follows certain narrative patterns. This study can guide us in understanding the motivations behind the fake news of today.

Background Information

Richard the Lionheart (1157-1199) is the perfect candidate for storytellers since the historical person acted larger than life. At the Battle of Jaffa, one example out of many, "he urged his sailors to bring his galley close to land, jumped into the shallows and charged ashore, firing from a crossbow and armed with a Danish axe, inspiring his companions to plunge into the Turks 'like madmen'" (Philips 290). If there is any medieval warrior king to embellish, Richard the Lionheart is a fine candidate.

What was his relationship with Saladin? Salah ad-Din (1137-1193), Sultan of Egypt and Syria, is regarded as the Noblest Prince of Islam as well as being a brilliant military commander. Despite the bloody conditions of being two medieval warlords opposed to each other, each started to have personal admiration for the other. According to Crusade historian Jonathan Philips of the University of London, the relationship developed to a point where "Richard himself faced criticism for becoming too amicable with [Saladin]" (317). Furthermore, Richard engaged in friendly interactions with Muslim warriors through his campaigns in the Holy Land and would even knight several of them (291).

Materials and Evidence Pt. 1

The key text for this research is a primary medieval source called *Richard Coeur de Lion* (hereto called *RCL*) that is a long poem translated into modern English. This is an anonymous text that has been found in seven different manuscripts, leading researchers to believe the text was popular. The earliest source for *RCL* traces back to the 1330s and it presents Richard's crusade to the Holy Land in a historical epic style. The events depicted in the *RCL* present a gross distortion of his historical events--yet those events follow the contours of history. More fantastical (and ghoulish) aspects were added onto the text later on.

The connection between King Richard and Alexander the Great is not without merit: both were courageous warrior princes who rode directly into battle and both were European kings on wars of "righteous" conquest of the Near East. Likewise, there is evidence that the story of Alexander the Great was well known during the writing of *RCL*, and that the exploits of the "Macedonian is found as an exemplum throughout his medieval literary career" (Bridges 88). Saladin is written as Alexander the Great's rival, Emperor Darius III. Saladin is again and again given these lists of lands and realms that he rules over (3703, 6590, 6895), implying the vastness of the East compared to the simplicity of England (Macedon). However, King Richard was not the ruler of a humble kingdom. King Richard's dominion included England, Wales, Ireland as well as half of France. If the point is to exalt the might and grandeur of King Richard, then a roll call of his lands would seem appropriate. However, doing so would clash with the Alexander the Great narrative so it is omitted.

Evidence Pt. 2

In addition Saladin is presented during *RCL* as repeatedly fleeing from battle. This did not occur in real life in Saladin's battles with Richard, but it famously happened twice with Emperor Darius. The staging of the battles also matches up with the Classical World, with the final battle between Richard and Saladin being the most epic. Lines such as "On hill and dale, there were slain / Ten hundred thousand heathen men / That night, without a lie" (7141-3) showcase the ludicrous inflation of these battles. Richard, in turn, accomplished this with a force of "many thousands" (7083). This setup directly mirrors the decisive Battle of Gaugamela that won Alexander the Persian Empire where he led a host of 47,000 against a Persian army of 100,000. Richard is made an offer by Saladin's messenger "that if [Richard] would forsake Jesus / And take Muhammad as his lord, / [Saladin] would make him the King of Syria, / And of Egypt, that rich country [...]" (3703-6). This moment has clear religious allegories as it shares the premise of Jesus tempted by Satan in the desert and offered up the world if he would only worship the Prince of Darkness (Matthew 4:8-9). This episode also echoes a moment starring Alexander the Great. During the Siege of Tyre, the Persian Emperor sends Alexander an interesting offer. Emperor Darius III offered Alexander half of the known world. Parmenion, Alexander's general, says that if he were Alexander, he would take the offer. Alexander replies that if he were Parmenion he would accept the offer, but since he is Alexander, he will refuse the deal and conquer Persia (Arrian 52).

Conclusion

In January 2019 the news reported an alleged hate crime committed against actor Jussie Smollett. As the weeks followed, evidence mounted that Jussie Smollett fabricated a hate crime. He is currently being prosecuted for the alleged hate crime (*The Guardian*). Widespread derision followed, but to be fair to Smollett he was following the very powerful narrative of the 60s Civil Rights Movement. To put it simply, Smollett engaged in fake news in order to further certain goals, and if that goal was to bring further spotlight to often ignored hate crimes, it is understandable how someone could rationalize themselves into doing what Smollett did.

Likewise the authors of *RCL* cannot just be dismissed. The caricature of Saladin misses the point. The point being that *RCL* presents King Richard as *greater* than Alexander the Great, and thus provides the English with a warrior king to rival the French icon of Charlemagne (and if Saladin's image has to be defaced in the process so be it) The discourse around fake news in American also misses the point: the problem has to do with larger strategic narratives rather than the tactics of the news cycle. Using an old text like *RCL*, seeing how and why the rivalry between Richard and Saladin was corrupted, brings to light dynamics playing out today.

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