

行政院國家科學委員會專題研究計畫 期中進度報告

中古英文歷史誌中的外國意念與國族認同(2/3)

計畫類別：整合型計畫

計畫編號：NSC93-2411-H-002-016-BK

執行期間：93年08月01日至94年07月31日

執行單位：國立臺灣大學外國語文學系暨研究所

計畫主持人：楊明蒼

報告類型：精簡報告

處理方式：本計畫可公開查詢

中 華 民 國 94 年 5 月 4 日

# 行政院國家科學委員會專題研究計畫進度報告

計畫編號：NSC 93-2411-H-002-016-BK  
執行期限：93年8月1日至94年7月31日  
主持人：楊明蒼 台大外文系  
計畫參與人員：王凱弘 台大外文所

## 1. Abstract

Many scholars have argued against the validity or possibility of talking about discourse of the nation or expressions of national identity in the Middle Ages. But the useless premodern/modern divide cannot help explore the issues in view; what we should do is not to argue if there was national identity in the Middle Ages but to examine the elements of national identity and their functions in different contexts. This study not only hopes to invigorate the traditional discipline and deepen the theoretical inquiries of medieval studies without downplaying the historical and cultural specificity of an earlier age but, more importantly, opens the contemporary discussions to a different and broader context so as to help us reflect on the limitations and problems of contemporary theories. The major problems considered include the validity of talking about national identity in the proposed study, the debate of essentialism and constructivism, the complex but informative relationship between national identity and the idea of foreignness, and the role religion plays in enhancing or blocking the possibility of national identity. The theoretical review has confirmed the validity of the work done in the previous year and has also made follow-up studies possible and necessary.

**Keywords:** discourse of the nation, Englishness, national identity, foreignness, essentialism, constructivism

## 中文摘要

許多學者論稱國族是現代的觀念，不適用於中世紀相關的討論。本計劃嘗試探討國族認同及概念在中古英國文學的相關性，研究中古英國歷史誌中所呈現的外國意念如何型塑國族認同的想像，希望藉此開啟傳統研究新的方向，同時能深化理論的思維，不但析論其助益也反省其可能問題。計畫第二年著重在理論的反省與思辯，主要探討的課題包括國族論述在中世紀是否存在、本質論與建構論之辯、國族認同與外國意念之關聯以及宗教與國族認同之關係。此一理論的反省顯示計畫第一年的研究方向適當可行，也使得第三年的工作更為必要。

**關鍵詞：**國族論述、英國性、國族認同、外國意念、本質論、建構論

## 2. Background and Purpose

Many scholars have argued against the validity or possibility of talking about perceptions of the nation or expressions of national identity in the Middle Ages. Prominent scholars such as Benedict Anderson (1983), Ernest Gellner (1983) and Eric

Hobsbawm (1990) limit nationalism to the eighteenth century and after, viewing it as an aspect of secularization and modernization. According to Anderson, national consciousness could only be possible after the medieval period, when religious communities and dynastic realms ceased to dominate collective imaginings (1983: 9-25). Some recent studies, on the other hand, argue for the presence of national consciousness in the sixteenth century, at least in the English context (e.g., Helgerson 1992, Hadfield 1994, Grabes, ed. 2001). These two camps of critics share the same misconception of the great pre-modern/modern divide in homogenizing the Middle Ages as the pre-modern and pre-nationalist past in which historical and cultural difference is hardly imaginable. In opposition to this modernist bias, more and more scholars have tried to justify the relevance and significance of medieval studies in the debates about the historical formation of concepts of national identities. Besides John Armstrong's pioneering *Nations before Nationalism*, which casts doubt on modernist assumptions by probing into processes of identity formation in pre-modern Christian ethnic civilizations, the contributors of the seminal collection, *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages*, jointly explore the areas hitherto ignored by the modernist view (Forde, Johnson and Murray eds., 1995). On the other hand, Adrian Hastings's study of nationhood explicitly traces English nationalism further back to the Middle Ages (1997) while Thorlac Turville-Petre's important contribution, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340*, draws on a wide variety of texts to show "the similarities between medieval and modern expressions of national identity" (1996: v).

Lesley Johnson's reminder is particularly relevant: The useless premodern/modern divide cannot help explore the issues in view; what we should do is not to argue if there was national identity in the Middle Ages but to examine the elements of national identity and their expressions and functions in different contexts. The general indifference of medieval scholars to national identity as a subject of investigation, while ironically reinscribing the modernist bias, may be attributed to the tendency to associate discourse of the nation with such extreme manifestations as separatist movements and aggressive politics. Without any presuppositions, this project is open to both the possibility of medieval national identity and the contribution of contemporary theoretical inquiries. The methodology adopted is therefore twofold: on the one hand, it tries to collect texts and materials of Middle English period to lay the groundwork for subsequent research; on the other hand, it also keeps track on the recent development and debates on issues of national identity to explore their relevance to medieval studies. In so doing, it not only hopes to invigorate the traditional discipline and deepen the theoretical inquiries of medieval studies without downplaying the historical and cultural specificity of an earlier age but, more

importantly, opens the contemporary discussions to a different and broader context so as to help us reflect on the limitations and problems of contemporary theories.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

The major problem to deal with is the validity of talking about national identity in the proposed study. Modernists' disavowal of continuity between premodern communities and modern nations, while warning against anachronism and conceptual confusion, deprives scholars of possibly fruitful inquiries that go beyond the modernist confines. To begin with, the modern meanings of the term "nation" are ambiguously varied. Even if we can fix a stable meaning, how can we be sure that earlier usage of the term differs significantly from modern ones? Perennialists and primordialists, despite their common pitfalls of essentialism and naturalism, are helpful in this regard for they draw our attention to possible forms of nations in different times. Among those theories that challenge the modernist ideology, ethno-symbolism promises great potential for the purpose of this project, for, while relating national identities to prior ethnic ties over a long duration of time to reveal the complex relationships between past, present and future and the place of nations in history, it highlights the relationship between elites and the people, "gives more weight to subjective elements of memory, value, sentiment, myth and symbol" and "seeks to enter and understand the 'inner worlds' of ethnicity and nationalism" (Smith 2001: 57). Therefore, it is to vernacular literature that we may look for development and expression of nationalism.

The second problem concerns the debate of essentialism and constructivism. While critics like Homi Bhabha foreground the constructiveness and ambivalence of identity formation (1990), Robert Colls insists that "National identity must correspond to, and make sense of, the real world"; it cannot be constructed according to convenience (2002: 6). The two opposing approaches can actually be complimentary to each other, as Clifford Geertz shows. For Geertz, primordial attachments rest on perceptions and beliefs which individuals and members of collectivities feel and believe to be something given, which explains why they generate so much passion and such strong attachments (1973: 259-60). Bhabha's discussion of nation in the light of narration promises special contribution literary studies can yield to the discourse of the nation, and Anderson's notion of "imagined community," despite his oversimplification of the Middle Ages, is still of referential value.

The third problem, which is related to the second, is the complex but informative relationship between national identity and the idea of foreignness. As Armstrong points out, "groups tend to define themselves not by reference to their own characteristics but by exclusion, that is, by comparison to 'strangers'" (1982: 5).

Colls also emphasizes the need to consider English identity beyond the boundary of England, just as it is not imposed upon people at the bottom (2002: 7). The idea of foreignness is particularly informative granted the difficulty in defining “national identity.” The dialectic between identity and difference is one important issue that I will continue to investigate in the next year.

Another crucial problem to tackle is the role religion plays in enhancing or blocking the possibility of national identity. For Hastings, the nation of Israel provides the prototype of a true/new Israel and the heir of God’s chosen people. It is therefore in the Church and the biblical tradition that western nationalism originates and develops. O’Brien also traces the nature and origins of holy nationalism to the unified vision of biblical territorialism and promised land conjoined with religion articulated in the Bible, thus identifying an important movement from “chosen people” to “holy people” to “deified nation” (1988). In the history of England, according to Colls, Christianity since Bede’s time had been the strongest agent of national identity. Transcending local rivalries, it helped shape England into one kingdom (2002: 57).

#### **4. Self-Assessment**

The medieval imaginations of nation and expressions of national identity turn out to be too complicated for a one-year research to tackle. But this is exactly why this three-year project is necessary. Even though the study could not cover the many issues related to discourses of the nation and national identity, but the theoretical review has confirmed the validity of the work done in the previous year and has also made follow-up studies possible and necessary. In the wake of the rising significance of the medieval perspective, the long legend of St. Thomas à Becket in the Middle English *South English Legendary* offers a succinct reflection on the on-going nationalism debates. It not only articulates early English nationalism but also exploits the tension and relation of national and religious identities, in Thomas’s time (second half of the twelfth century) as well as in the time of its composition (late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). This project will continue to study how the idea of foreignness helps shape the imagination of national identity in Middle English historiography. It will not only examine the dynamics of the emergent national identity in Middle English historical writings but also probe into the limitations of their imagination of foreignness and community identities.

In the next year, I will work more with my colleagues to learn from their different perspective and insight. Meanwhile, I need to consult more related texts and documents (regarding both Middle English historiography and discourses on nationalism) to build up a greater frame of reference. This way, we can better assess the validity and relevance of medieval English nationalism.

As a whole, I believe this research project is a promising one. Besides the acquisition of related studies and research materials from abroad on my part, in the process the research assistant could also apply the research skills and methodology involved in this project to his own research and thesis writing. Medieval studies, partly due to its seeming irrelevance to our contemporary society, has been generally ignored here in Taiwan. But studies of the Middle Ages are pivotal to understanding the development and transformation of western literature, culture, history, religion, politics, etc. In recent years, the Taiwanese society has been bedeviled by debates on issues of national identity, which overshadow the course of development Taiwan will take. This project can therefore bridge western medieval studies and contemporary local concerns, demonstrating how Middle English studies can relate to our contemporary reality. A study of this sort goes beyond the global/local divide as it both enters the early stages of English literature/culture and in turn helps us reflect on issues of national identity in a broader context with a profound awareness of historicity. This is the hitherto ignored and unrealized value and contribution of medieval studies.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Community, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Armstrong, John. *Nations before Nationalism*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1982.
- Bhabha, Homi K., ed. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Colls, Robert. *Identity of England*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- D'Evelyn, Charlotte and Anna J. Mill, eds. *The South English Legendary*. 2 vols. London: EETS, 1956.
- Forde, Simon, Lesley Johnson and Alan V. Murray, eds. *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages*. Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 1995.
- Frederick, Jill. "The *South English Legendary*: Anglo-Saxon Saints and National Identity." *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 57-73.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana, 1973.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.
- Graves, Herbert, ed. *Writing the Early Modern English Nation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001.
- Hadfield, Andrew. *Literature, Politics and National Identity: Reformation to Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

- Hastings, Adrian. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Helgerson, Richard. *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Jankofsky, Klaus P. "National Characteristics in the Portrayal of English Saints in the *South English Legendary*." *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*. Ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991. 81-93.
- O'Brien, Conor Cruse. *God-Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988.
- Ozkirimli, Umut. *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.
- Smith, Anthony D. *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*. New York : Routledge, 1998.
- . *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- . *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Polity: Cambridge, 2001.
- Turville-Petre, Thorlac. *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.