Transforming the Errant Self: *The Matrix* and *Richard, Coeur de Lion*
Suzanne M. Yeager (Cornell University)

This paper seeks to explore new readings of *Richard, Coeur de Lion* through the recent film, *The Matrix*. The discussion will focus on the intersections of violence and religious faith, and the role of these two elements in their reciprocal relationship. In considering the readings of an errant self in light of current film and medieval romance, one finds in “The Matrix” a neo-medieval text which shares transformations of identity crucial to the medieval romance, *Richard, Coeur de Lion*. While the Richard of romance is transformed into the “most Christian king” he is, at the same time, made to play the role of cannibalizing aggressor of the Saracen Other. Indeed, the Richard of romance is portrayed as more “Christian” in direct relation to the more diabolical and like the Other he becomes. A present-day audience of the romance may consider this interaction of Christian piety and diabolical aggression to be contradictory; *The Matrix*, however, shares this discourse. While Richard’s devilish behavior serves to consolidate English Christian power, the character, Neo, is similarly transformed into the savior of humanity as he de-humanizes himself, crosses the boundary into the world of the machines, and, like Richard, “consumes” the other.

Both characters sustain their appetite for destruction as long as they are portrayed in their roles as wanderers. Richard, as “Goddes own pilgrim” carries out his bellicose campaign in the other-worlds of eastern Europe and the Middle East. The character, Neo, like that of Richard, is also portrayed as a pilgrim who wanders in a world which is not his own. Subsequently, Neo gains divine power and is perceived as a savior as he learns to enact violence upon the world of the Matrix. Richard and Neo’s adversaries are dehumanized to the point that one is unable to differentiate one Saracen or Agent from another. Richard and Neo, however, become so similar to their adversaries that they are eventually able to exceed them in their diabolical might. The transformations of character take place in unrooted space. Richard operates outside the bounds of England and France and is made into a super-human killing machine, while Neo works beyond human time and earthly dimension as he gains his other-worldly knowledge. Ultimately, both are presented as Christ-figures and saviors of humankind in spite of their becoming, in effect, more diabolical than the evil itself which they aim to destroy.

What links this paper to the rhizome and the errant self most effectively is the fact that both transformations are carried out in un-rooted space. On the one hand, the historical Richard is transformed by the romancer into a specifically English King with English crusading interests—a far cry from the French Duke who, according to Roger of Howden, visited England twice in his life before his coronation. On the other hand, Neo, the allegorical representative of Christ, is also re-contextualized from the historical Jesus Christ whom the Gospels present as an advocate of peace; his new role is that of a war-like lord, greedy for destruction. The narrative shift toward violence is perhaps a result of the concretization of the final goal: the Celestial Jerusalem. By making what was once an Augustinian allegory—that of the Celestial Jerusalem, the ultimate goal of the soul enacting pilgrimage on earth—into a tangible objective, the protagonists become more violent. Therefore the use of force to gain Terrestrial Jerusalem, or Sion, is sanctioned as the modes of allegory and reality coalesce. This paper explores both the romance and the film in order to discuss how violence offers both the present-day and the medieval audience the perception of holiness.