

Review of: "Blacks in the Middle Ages – What About Racism in the Past? Literary and Art-Historical Reflections"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

There is a wealth of promising material in Albrecht Classen's "Blacks in the Middle Ages" but I think a narrowing of focus could make the argument clearer, stronger, and easier to follow. Some of the references to contemporary issues like Critical Race Theory or mass incarceration might be omitted, for instance: both are huge topics which deserve their own careful analyses; both draw on vastly different ideas about justice, identity, and community unavailable in the middle ages, and leaving them out would permit more attention to the ways medieval people thought about race and tribe and home.

I also think Dr. Classen might consider the subject of "race" rather than "racism;" the first is a cultural concept, the second a social problem, and the excellent examples he provides highlight portraits of "worthy individuals" who happen to be black, rather than encounters between different groups of people which magnify their differences rather than their similarities.

The knight Morien is an excellent example of one of medieval romance's "worthy individuals," but his story involves a variety of ideas about blackness which Dr. Classen might examine at greater length. The knight is an adolescent living in the woods when Arthur's knights encounter him; Morien is polite, adept at chivalric customs, incredibly tall (and possibly still growing?), and able to defend himself bravely and skillfully. He is teary but not defiant. Most of Arthur's knights bleed, sometimes copiously, but Morien's body, while feeling pain, remains intact. Any unease which Arthur's knights experience upon first meeting him are contrasted with the obvious ease with which Morien carries himself in their world. Certainly the undamaged surface of Morien's black form provides a stark contrast with modern images of the ravaged black bodies of people like Emmett Till (another teenager) and George Floyd, and perhaps Dr. Classen might explore why many medieval encounters with black bodies privilege ekphrasis, physicality, beauty, and skin rather than pry into a black person's head or heart. Elena Stanciu's 2013 discussion of "The Black Male Body: Violence and Representation in American Visual Culture" could be a useful source here.

Morien's example is, again, so instructive because he is encountered in the woods rather than at court and, although (seemingly) fatherless, he has a mother, a homeland, a culture, and a path back to his people. Presumably Morien has travelled a route traversed by other medieval people and objects, including gold, spices, silk, and enslaved men and women, and so the meeting between him and Arthur's knights explodes the circle of Camelot by representing the flourishing presence of the rest of the world. Sara M. Guerin's 2018 study of "Exchange of Sacrifices: West Africa in the Medieval World of Goods" might be something else for Dr. Classen to include.

One of Marie de France's *lais* "Lanval" causes a similar disruption when the narrator claims that the fairy who rescues the neglected knight Lanval is richer and more beautiful than the Assyrian princess Semiramis. The reference hints at a world beyond Arthur's realm, a world that is neither European nor Christian nor broken the way Arthur's court is. But this fairy is also represented in terms of a blinding whiteness. She is dressed in ermine, covered in silk, and exquisitely attired in ways that showcase her creamy flesh. Whiteness has a kind of supernatural power in Marie de France's story, providing Lanval with bottomless wealth, an opportunity to revise ideas about justice, and a way to fault Arthur's queen for her aggressive sexuality and tawny skin.

That blackness has a future and a past, a geography and a lineage is something "Morien" emphasizes: "worthy individuals" always come from somewhere, and rarely in medieval stories are they imagined as stray figures. Thinking about "Lanval" might encourage Dr. Classen to consider how medieval whiteness sometimes suppresses those narratives.