

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

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This article addresses a somewhat vexed question: whether one can apply terms and concepts retrospectively to periods when they were unknown or at least the term was never used. Searching for racism in the Middle Ages is such an example. The term 'racism' entered the vocabulary of European languages probably in the 1930s with the publication of the German sexologist, Magnus Hirschfeld's, book of that name. Of Jewish descent and an indefatigable activist for gay rights, Hirschfeld was reacting to Nazi antisemitism and the regime's attempts to make 'race' the all-determining political and legal concept of the regime. The 'race' in our modern understanding of a taxonomy of human beings, originates in the second half of the 18th century.

The article under review focuses on 'Blacks', i.e. people of African descent and their apparently occasional mentions in medieval literature. The argument is somewhat tentatively put, not really until the conclusion, when the author states conclusively "There is a certain carelessness combined with a political agenda to use the term 'racism' in an inflationary manner, and to work in an anachronistic fashion of equating modern-day racism with the phenomena (plural!) that we can observe in the past." The author is clearly uncomfortable with such anachronisms or rather anachronistic readings and the article does in fact attempt on the basis of close readings of both canonical (Parzifal) and lesser known texts to paint a nuanced picture. The overall conclusions seem to point away from highly negative representations of black figures (which would be necessary to justify the term 'racism') and shows instead a much more ambivalent picture of sometimes highly laudatory representations ("most of the black individuals are outstanding personalities who attract much attention and even admiration"). The problem for a CRT approach, which the author seems to distance himself from, is that black is often equated with Muslim/ Saracen/ Moor. There are few black figures in the selection who are not also implicitly or explicitly Muslims. I cannot really enter into a discussion of the textual exegesis because it is outside my field but the article would benefit from a more emphatic statement of its position in the introduction, at least as an hypothesis in the line with the statement in the conclusion.