

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

Ana Rita Martins¹

¹ Universidade de Lisboa

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The article "Blacks in the Middle Ages – What About Racism in the Past? Literary and Art-Historical Reflections" by Albrecht Classen offers an interesting take on what has been a contentious line of inquiry in medieval studies over the last decades: the investigation of race. Drawing on several literary documents (*Blandin of Cornoalha*, 13th century, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, c. 1205, and *Romance of Moriaen*, mid-13th century) and works of art (Alfonso X's *Libros del Ajedrez, Dados y Tablas*, 1283, and Conrad Kyaser's *Bellifortis*, 1405, namely the famous drawing of the black Queen Saba or Sheba) where, it is argued, black-skinned characters are portrayed as equals to fair-skinned ones, the author seeks to highlight that there is "an alternative discourse to embrace at least individual Blacks as equals within the [medieval] courtly and religious context" (abstract).

There are several vital arguments made regarding whether medieval European societies already knew some form of systemic racism. As mentioned by the author, use of language is quite tricky since such concepts were only formulated and expanded on well after the Middle Ages ended. Although the absence of a term does not mean that the object or in this case the set of behaviours, beliefs, etc., now associated with it did not exist, it complicates matters and requires us to understand these terms differently (Heng 2018). As a result, the construction of this theoretical framework remains hard and controversial, especially without falling into ideological battles. On this point, the author considers that the principle of *sine ira et studio* must be embraced from the outset when examining representations of people of colour in the Middle Ages – a reasonable proposition, in my view.

The author makes another very good point when he warns against making racism "the only issue relevant for the critical reading of a literary text or artwork" (p. 3), an advice that can be applied to any line of inquiry. With that in mind, it is convincingly argued that there were "unexpected forms of open-minded relationships between the races" (p. 3) in the European medieval period. However, it is of prime importance not only to consider how widespread these 'open-minded relationships' were – a point acknowledged by the author in the conclusion – but also, I would add, whether they fit into a larger pattern of portrayals (or not) and why. Granting that it would have been extremely hard if not impossible to take all these points into account in a single essay, it may well be a necessary task so that more definite conclusions can be reached.

Another interesting point the author draws our attention to is the impact Christian religion had on the medieval understanding of blackness, which is especially discussed in the analysis of the *Romance of Moriaen* and highlights how the notion of race in the Middle Ages is often made more complex *because* of the religious undertones that accompanies

it. This is a key point that, albeit not often contemplated when race and the Middle Ages are discussed, can help contemporary scholars and the general audience understand some of these textual and visual representations. In fact, the equation between blackness and the devil, and thus evil, is fundamental to comprehend these seemingly opposite portrayals (while Arthur's knights embrace Moriaen as their equal, the other presumably white Christians fear the black-skinned hero). Here it might have been useful to refer to the history of the colour black to further explore how these ideas come into play in medieval romance. Michel Pastoureau's excellent study, *Noir. Histoire d'une Couleur (Black. The History of a Colour)*, provides a compelling analysis as he refers to "good black" and "bad black" and identifies the feudal period as the moment black "made its entrance into the devil's palette and became for many centuries an infernal color" (Pastoureau 46). The history of colour and the history of race have traditionally been studied separately but given the specificities of the medieval period, looking at these two fields together may prove fruitful.

This being said, there are also points which in my view raise some doubts, such as the claim that it is impossible to identify and, therefore, listen to medieval black voices because they do not exist (p. 2). Thus, it is argued, contemporary research is necessarily "limited to White Europeans" (p. 2). Because there are many Arabic authors whose rich production survived past the medieval period, I wonder if none of these authors were black-skinned. If not, I would recommend identifying the studies (or study) where readers can access these findings. Also, thinking about language, it might be useful to clarify to whom the expression "Christian white Europeans" can be applied. Although I realise the author is speaking in general terms, it is questionable to state that the peoples who lived in the Iberian Peninsula during the circa ten centuries that make up the medieval period were mostly white Christians (one immediately recalls that the Emirate of Granada only fell in the last decade of the fifteenth century). Since the author refers to medieval Spain, it can be presumed that he is aware of this discrepancy so it might be useful to clarify this too.

In addition, I wonder what the author thinks about the representation of the Black Knight(s) found in *Blandin of Cornoalha* in light of Pfeffer and Burrell's reading who seem to regard the romance as "a parody of medieval romance in general". Even though this is a recent publication, the author must be familiar with it since it is cited in the list of works consulted. Read as a parody, would the scenes analysed not have a different, less positive meaning? And could a similar, unfavorable conclusion not be reached about the description of Belacane in *Parzival*? Albeit agreeing that Belacane's portrayal is similar in every way to that of a most noble woman (except for the colour of her skin), she also seems belong to a moderately extensive list of female love interests who are willing to forsake their religion, and presumably their culture, to win (or keep) the love of the Christian hero. I am thinking for instance of Josian in *Bevis of Hampton* (c. 1300) who is not depicted as black-skinned, but her religion means she must convert to Christianity before she can find her (Christian) happy ending with Bevis. Furthermore, the negative comments about Belacane's blackness (and of the other inhabitants of the kingdom of Zazamanc) are revealing of the hero's (and possibly of the author's and the period's) mindset when it comes to black people (or people of colour in general). Stating that "blackness no longer matters here at all" (p. 7) is dismissive of the impact these accounts had (and arguably still have) on those of darker skin, especially because references to skin colour are made more than once, emphasizing the Queen's difference, which seems to boil down to race.

All in all, this article is thought-provoking, as it addresses a key issue in medieval studies – racism – about which there is still so much to discuss. I believe the text makes a valuable contribution to the field, though one last critique must be made: it is rather short. As the author addresses several literary and art works produced in the Middle Ages (and even beyond), I was left with the impression that each analysis could be expanded to include more details about production, context, and so on. The paragraph about Balthazar for example is noteworthy but quite short. Perhaps the author might consider writing more about each of these works and, thereby, refine some arguments that, though valuable, could have been more fully developed. Finally, there are some details pertaining to language that I imagine the author would like to correct; they are:

1. p. 4 in "...It also entails the general process of marginalizing and **repression** entire sections of the population... ." – perhaps **repressing** (instead of repression) fits better here;
2. p. 5, 3rd paragraph, in "Subsequently, Guilhot enters the wasteland where the future opponent **reside** and protects his orchard..." – should read **resides**;
3. p. 5, 4th paragraph, in "In fact, **one** the Black Knight has died...." – should read **once**;
4. p. 11, 2nd paragraph, in "But the friends then move into the Moorish kingdom, where **the** encounter the usual...." – should read **they**;
5. p. 13, last paragraph, in "Later even became the patron saint of the Kingdom of..." – I believe the subject **the** is missing (**Later he even** became...).

Reference list

Heng, Geraldine. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* Cambridge UP, 2018.

Pastoureau, Michel. *Black. The History of a Colour*. Princeton UP, 2008.

Pfeffer, Wendy, and Margaret Burrell, editors. *Blandin de Cornoalha, A Comic Occitan Romance: A New Critical Edition* Medieval Institute Publications, 2022.

Note: I have refrained from making any comments on the analysis of the manuscript illuminations since I am neither familiar with them nor is my field of research medieval art; therefore, I feel I cannot adequately provide feedback.