

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

Bruno Cesar Andrade¹

¹ Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Overall, the article "Blacks in the Middle Ages – What About Racism in the Past? Literary and Art-Historical Reflections" by Albrecht Classen provides a useful exploration of the complexities of racism in the medieval period. The article examines various examples of narratives and artworks that portray surprisingly positive images of Blacks, challenging the assumption that racism was universal in medieval Europe.

The author's analysis of the relationship between Christian white Europeans and Blacks in medieval society is insightful, highlighting the racist roots in the Old Testament, but also the counter-narratives present in the New Testament. The article also acknowledges the need for a black voice in the Middle Ages and acknowledges the difficulty of finding such voices due to the absence of black narratives in the period.

The article provides a detailed summary of the encounter between Guilhot and the Black Knight in the Occitan romance *Blandin de Cornoalha*. The author examines the similarities between this black knight and other opponents in previous romances, highlighting how he is a formidable and worthy adversary. However, the author notes that there is no indication that the narrator viewed the Black Knight's blackness negatively.

The article is well-written and provides a clear and detailed analysis of the depiction of the Black Knight in *Blandin de Cornoalha*. The author's analysis is insightful and informative, and they effectively highlight the similarities and differences between the Black Knight and other opponents in previous romances. Moreover, the author's observation that there are no clear indications that the narrator viewed the Black Knight's blackness negatively is an important point that adds nuance to the discussion of the Black Knight in medieval literature.

However, there are a few areas where the article could be improved. Firstly, while the author provides a detailed summary of the encounter between Guilhot and the Black Knight, they do not provide any analysis of what this encounter might signify in the broader context of the romance. It would be useful for the author to explore how this encounter fits into the larger narrative of the romance and what it might reveal about the themes or motifs of the text.

Secondly, the author mentions that the Black Knight's family members might avenge his death, but they do not explore this possibility in any depth. It would be interesting for the author to consider how the Black Knight's death might affect the narrative and what consequences it might have for the other characters.

Finally, while the author's analysis is informative, it would be helpful for them to provide more evidence to support their claims. For example, when the author notes that there are no clear indications that the narrator viewed the Black Knight's blackness negatively, they could provide quotes from the text to support this assertion.

The author moves on to discuss the Medieval Dutch Romance of *Moriaen*, a story of a black knight who is the product of a mixed-race marriage. Classen highlights how *Moriaen*'s physical appearance, towering over other knights and dressed entirely in black, often scares people away who see

him as the devil. However, as the other knights get to know him, they embrace him as their equal and defend him against the hostility or mistreatment of others. The article notes how Moriaen's mother, the Queen of the Moors, is presented in a dignified and worthy manner and accepted by the European audience once her husband returns and marries her officially. The author observes that, unlike some examples of racist depictions of black characters in medieval literature, Moriaen's exotic qualities are eliminated, and his character is treated with respect.

The article provides a clear and concise summary of the medieval Dutch Romance of Moriaen, and the author draws insightful comparisons with other medieval works. However, there are a few areas where this discussion could be improved. The author could provide more context on the historical and social circumstances in which the medieval Dutch Romance of Moriaen was written, as this would help readers understand the cultural and literary influences that shaped the work. Additionally, the author could provide more details about the characters and events in the story, as this would help readers follow the analysis more closely.

Furthermore, the debate could benefit from a more critical analysis of the text. For example, the author notes that Moriaen's physical appearance often scares people away, but does not comment on the fact that the story perpetuates negative stereotypes of black people as exotic and otherworldly. The author could also explore how the story treats Moriaen's mother reflects broader attitudes towards interracial marriage and mixed-race individuals in medieval Europe.

Overall, the article provides an interesting overview of the depiction of black people in medieval and Renaissance art in Germany. The author provides a detailed analysis of several artworks and manuscripts from this period, offering insights into the different roles and positions that black people occupied in European society at the time. The article is well-written and engaging, and the author draws on a range of sources to support their arguments.

However, there are a few areas where the article could be improved. Firstly, the author could provide more context around the historical and social factors that contributed to the portrayal of black people in medieval and Renaissance art. For example, the author briefly mentions the African diaspora, but could expand on this to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of black people during this period.

Secondly, the article would benefit from a more detailed analysis of the artworks themselves. While the author provides some insightful observations about the depiction of black people in these works, there are times when the analysis could be deeper and more nuanced. For example, when discussing the portrait of the black soldier by Jan Mostaert, the author could explore the symbolism and composition of the work in more detail to uncover its deeper meanings.

Overall, the article provides a valuable contribution to the study of medieval and Renaissance art and the representation of black people during this period. By addressing the above areas, the author could further enhance the quality and credibility of their work, and provide readers with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of this fascinating topic.

I found the article to be a well-researched and thought-provoking exploration of the presence of Black people in medieval Europe, as well as the attitudes and perceptions of race during that time. The author draws on a wide range of literary and artistic sources to build a nuanced picture of the ways in which Black people were represented and understood in medieval society.

One of the strengths of the article is the way in which it challenges common assumptions about the absence of Black people in medieval Europe. Through careful analysis of texts and images, the author shows that Black people were present and visible in a variety of contexts, including as

soldiers, slaves, and entertainers. This challenges the idea that medieval Europe was a homogeneous, exclusively white society.

The author also does an excellent job of contextualizing the representations of Black people that do appear in medieval sources. Rather than simply condemning or celebrating these representations, the author considers the broader cultural and historical context in which they were produced. This helps to avoid simplistic interpretations and instead encourages a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of race in medieval Europe.

One area where the article could be improved is in its engagement with modern debates around race and racism. While the author briefly acknowledges the ways in which medieval attitudes towards race have been used to justify later forms of racism, the article could benefit from a more sustained engagement with these debates. This could involve exploring how medieval attitudes towards race intersected with other forms of oppression, such as sexism or religious intolerance. For instance, the author briefly mentions the existence of anti-Semitic attitudes in medieval Europe, but could have delved deeper into the ways in which race and religion intersected to produce forms of discrimination and oppression that continue to affect marginalized communities today.

A useful resource in this regard is the book "Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code" by Ruha Benjamin. Benjamin argues that the digital age has given rise to a "new Jim Code," a system of technologically-mediated racial discrimination that has roots in historical forms of racism and oppression. In tracing the historical roots of the new Jim Code, Benjamin highlights the ways in which earlier forms of oppression intersected with race to produce the social, economic, and political structures that continue to shape our lives today.

Another useful resource is the article "Racism and Sexism in the Crusades," by historian Natasha Hodgson. Hodgson argues that the Crusades, which took place during the medieval period, were deeply rooted in both racism and sexism. She notes that the rhetoric of the Crusades often portrayed Muslim and Jewish people as inferior to Christians, and that the violence of the Crusades was often accompanied by the abuse and enslavement of women and girls.

By engaging with these and other contemporary debates around race and racism, Classen could deepen the analysis of the ways in which medieval attitudes towards race intersected with other forms of oppression. In doing so, they could offer readers a more nuanced understanding of the historical roots of modern forms of discrimination and inequality.

Overall, I would recommend this article to anyone interested in the history of race and racism in Europe. It provides a valuable perspective on the ways in which attitudes towards race have developed over time, and challenges us to question our assumptions about the past. My suggestions for improvement are mainly aimed at broadening the scope of the article, and I believe that the author has already done an excellent job of presenting a detailed and nuanced analysis of a complex topic.