

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.

Albrecht Classen's article presents medieval narratives to show that White and Black encounters have not always been slanted as modern-day racism forces us to think. Presenting some novels, the author discusses why he thinks some medieval literature and art positively include and recognize people of color. I suggest the following should the author wish to improve the insightful and relevant discussions in the article:

The author could indicate and strengthen the specific approach to the Literary Reflections used in the evaluation. Also, he could establish an understanding of racism to ensure that the reader does not consider all interactions between the Black and White race as racist. While I appreciate the author's caution in dealing with the problem of racism: "we have to be careful not to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water and become overly obsessed with reading every historical or literary document through that lens, as if racism has always been the all and only issue relevant for the critical reading of a literary text or art work," I think a functional framework for discussing racism may improve the discussions. For example, slavery, a universal unethical problem, predates Western Europe or America. Glimpses of this heinous act exist in almost every part of the world, both intragroup and intergroup. But slavery is different from racism. It could be said that racism causes slavery.

The author points out that "the placement of Blacks in Africa and their negative evaluation goes back, as we all know, to the Old Testament (Braude 1997), so the pre-modern period, in its Christian framework, was racist from the beginning, although the New Testament argued pretty much the opposite way." By such general reference, is the author endorsing the *Hamitic hypothesis* for marginalizing the Black race? Perhaps, Kevin Burrell's "Slavery, the Hebrew Bible and the Development of Racial Theories in the Nineteenth Century" may assist the author here. An important paragraph reads:

"...[Benjamin Braude \(2005\)](#) demonstrates that the Hamitic Hypothesis has been amazingly fungible, shifting its form to incorporate various "descendants" of Ham, depending on the social context and object of vilification. According to Braude, it was the image of the Jew that was most frequently associated with the benighted son of Ham in the medieval period. However, this would change dramatically in the nineteenth century: the myth of Ham would acquire "its most notorious manifestation in antebellum America" ([Goldenberg 2017, p. 1](#)), whereas "The thirteenth century depiction of Ham makes him a Jew. The nineteenth century depiction of Ham makes him a Black" ([Braude 2005, p. 80](#)). This shift was certainly born out of a need to justify slavery in antebellum America, but it was also specifically the result of concerted exegetical maneuverings of the biblical story" (Burrell K. "Slavery, the Hebrew Bible and the Development of Racial Theories in the Nineteenth Century," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021):742. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090742>).

Also, the author's notion that "What this argument entails, and what many younger scholars seem to demand, would be to identify a black voice in the Middle Ages and to listen to him/her, which would thus provide some equality in the discourse on race. Such a voice, however, does not exist, and we are limited to narrative by white Europeans who commented at times on black people and/or integrated Blacks as protagonists" needs some clarification. Probably modern understanding of racism is different from the medieval conception. In any case, when some White voices used medieval images and literature to support racism, some Black authors referred to medieval images and literature to refute such racist claims. Reginald Horsman's statement in his *Race and Manifest Destiny*, "the reign of world peace, order, and morality was to be established by the Anglo-Saxon-Teutonic Christians, and if necessary it was to be founded on the bodies of inferior races" is an example. Except the author wants to locate black voices in Medieval real time, a little probe will bring some modern Black voices who used medieval images and literature to challenge established racist claims to the fore—see Frederick Douglass' narratives, Charles Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), and W. E. B. Du Bois' *Dark Princess* (1928).

I think the debate about first-person narrative in academic papers is ongoing, probably, the author could benefit from knowing trends in the debate.

Per the author's judgment, Wolfram is different from other medieval poets because of the depiction of the erotic relationship between a White Man, a womanizer, and a Black woman, "Wolfram can be credited with having composed a work astoundingly free of racist ideology, as far as we can tell." I do not know how the author could evaluate slave masters who had erotic relationships with their female slaves. If erotic relationship cures racism, arguably, American society would have been a utopian society.

The author's reflection could have highlighted how systemic medieval racism showed in common beliefs, heroic accomplishments, wars, travel accounts, romances, and terminologies such as heretic, devil, and blackness to strengthen grounds for the reflections. Given the truth of Prof. Geraldine Heng's statement in *Did Race and Racism Exist in the Middle Ages?* (<https://notevenpast.org/did-race-and-racism-exist-in-the-middle-ages/>): "Sub-Saharan Africans were grimly depicted as killers of John the Baptist and torturers of Christ in medieval art," one could conclude that assigning blackness to torturers and killers in medieval novels was a way to slur Black people. Prof. Onyeka Nubia's *Diversity in Medieval and Early Modern England* could throw more light on this.