Teaching Essay | Race in the European Middle Ages

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This essay is the third in the Book Channel's Teaching Essays series, which aims to help teachers and instructors incorporate the latest research into their classroom curricula. It is also a response to ongoing debates within medieval scholarship about race and diversity—debates which have been covered extensively by outlets from Salon to the Chronicle of Higher Education (note: behind a paywall). Heng's essay provides practical guidance for educators seeking to integrate discussions of racial and religious diversity in their courses on the European Middle Ages, as well as a bibliography of recommended readings. Readers will also find links to online versions of many of the recommended primary sources throughout the essay. Geraldine Heng is the Perceval Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, where she also teaches in Middle Eastern Studies and Women's Studies. She is the founder and director of the Global Middle Ages Project (G-MAP). Currently, Dr. Heng holds an ACLS fellowship to begin work on her fourth book, Early Globalities: The Interconnected World, 500-1500 CE. Her newest book, The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages, comes out from Cambridge University Press on March 8, 2018. –Assistant Editor Adrienne Tyrey

When I was a graduate student, I was taught (believe it or not) that women hardly featured or mattered in European medieval literature: this was a literature written by men, about men, and for men.

Fast forward a couple of decades, and we see women everywhere in medieval literature and history: we see that they mattered, a lot. And not just women: college courses today highlight medieval sexuality and sexual identity; the politics of physical disability and disease; ecology and the environment; Jews, Muslims, and colonized peoples; peasants and social class—an ever-expanding list.
What about race in the Middle Ages? For generations, race studies taught us that race was a concept with meaning only for the modern era. Originally defined in biological terms, race was thought to be determined by skin color, physiognomy, and genetic inheritance. The more astute scholars, however, soon realized that race could also be a matter of cultural classification, as Ann Stoler’s 1977 study of the colonial Dutch East Indies makes plain:

Race could never be a matter of physiology alone. Cultural competency in Dutch customs, a sense of “belonging” in a Dutch cultural milieu, … disaffiliation with things Javanese, … domestic arrangements, parenting styles, and moral environment … were crucial to defining … who was to be considered European. [1]

Yet even after we saw that people could be racialized through cultural and social criteria, the European Middle Ages was still seen as outside the history of race (I speak only of the European Middle Ages since I am a euromedievalist—it is up to others to discuss race in Islamic, Jewish, Asian,
African, and American premodernities).

My book, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (appearing March 8, 2018), suggests that such thinking has been overly influenced by the era of scientific racism (in the so-called Age of Enlightenment) when *science* was the magisterial discourse of racial classification.

But today, in news media and public life, we see how *religion* can also function to classify people in absolute and fundamental ways — Muslims, who hail from a diversity of ethno-races and national origins, have been talked about as if their religion somehow identified them as one homogenous people.

*Invention of Race* thus puts forward an understanding of race more apposite to our time, as well as medieval time:

“Race” is one of the primary names we have—a name we retain for the commitments it recognizes—that is attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively identified as absolute and fundamental, so as to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. In race-making, strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices: This suggests that race is a structural relationship for the management of human differences, rather than a substantive content. [2]
English Jew wearing the Jewish badge on his chest in the form of the tablets of the Old Testament. BL Cotton MS Nero, D2, fol.180, thirteenth century. British Library, UK, reproduced from The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages.

Rather than oppose premodern “prejudice” to modern racisms, we can then see the vilification of medieval Jews—who were fantasized as possessing a fetid stench, a male menses, subhuman and bestial qualities, and a congenital need to ingest the blood of Christian children whom they tortured and crucified to death—as more than mere “prejudice.” We can acknowledge that their mob exterminations, legalized murder by the state on the basis of community rumors and lies, tagging with identifying badges, and herding into specified towns in England were racial acts, which today we could possibly call hate crimes, of a sanctioned and legalized kind.

In this way, we would bear witness to the full meaning of acts and events in the medieval past, and understand that racial thinking, racial practices, and racial phenomena can occur before there is a vocabulary to name them for what they are.

How, then, would we teach medieval race?

In art history, scholars have identified a multitude of images, objects, and architectural features that can be productively studied by students in classes on race. Volume 2 Part 1 of The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the Early Christian Era to the “Age of Discovery” by Jean Devisse (recently reissued with a new introduction by Paul H. D. Kaplan) offers an extraordinary array of images for investigation—from grim black African executioners of John the Baptist and black African torturers of Christ to the enigmatic Black St. Maurice, a martyr who after a thousand years was suddenly depicted as a black African at Magdeburg Cathedral in Germany, where he was (and still is) the patron saint.
Paul Kaplan’s *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* gives us a point of entry for thinking about how blackness and Africa serve the story of Christianity, while Madeline Caviness tells the other side of the story—how *whiteness* ascended to primacy in defining Christian European identity from the mid-thirteenth century on. By focusing not on black but on white as the key determinant of identity, Caviness’s article, “*From the Self-Invention of the Whiteman in the Thirteenth Century to The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*,” rounds out how to think about color as a medieval racial project.

Debra Higgs Strickland’s *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* and Ruth Mellinkoff’s *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages* show us the implications of the iconography that visualized Jews, Muslims, Mongols, and monstrous humans for medieval audiences. Strickland reminds us that the human freaks depicted in art, cartography, and literature—often celebrated as wondrous and marvelous—should not teach us that medieval pleasure is pleasure of a simply and wholly innocent kind. The “Monstrous Races tradition,” she urges, “provided the ideological infrastructure” for understanding “other types of ‘monsters’, namely Ethiopians, Jews, Muslims, and Mongols” (42). This is a lesson to heed—and pass on—in how to think about medieval race.
**In literature**, courses examining anti-black, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic stories are growing in number. My first book, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, drew attention to texts little-noticed a decade and a half ago, like the Middle English romances *Richard Coer de Lyon* and *The King of Tars*. Reading the former, students are riveted by how the crusader King Richard, an aggressive imperialist, becomes a lip-smacking cannibal through a joke that turns the “Saracen” Muslim enemy—black-skinned, with white, grinning teeth—into delicious food, stewed in a dish that looks like the first iteration of the colonial mishmash later known as curry. This romance can be taught as early colonial literature that gleefully propagandizes on race and religion.

*The King of Tars*, which teaches how religion is so supreme that it can reconfigure race, can also be taught in religious studies classes. Here, a black, “loathly” Muslim king turns spotless white at his...
baptism, and a lump of flesh—the fetal issue of this black king and a lily-white Christian princess—transforms into the fairest child ever born, again at baptism. Medieval literature teaches that Christian sacraments are powerful race-makers.

There’s more. Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* has a fair-skinned Arthurian knight from Christian Europe venture into a heathen African country of black folk, where he sires a piebald son on a black African queen before abandoning her. This parti-colored son, Feirefiz, later marries the radiantly fair Grail maiden, and the polychromatic nuptial pair move to India, where they become the birth parents of Prester John (thus supplying the earlier, twelfth-century epistolary legend of Prester John with a luminous backstory), and Feirefiz evangelizes India by writing letters, like the apostles Peter and Paul. I leave readers to decide what this literary fantasy of global race relations means.

In the Dutch romance *Moriaen*, the plot arc is reversed. A black African knight from Moorland visits Arthurian Europe in search of his father, a knight of King Arthur’s who had promised, but failed, to marry the young knight’s mother. This exquisite, little-taught text has a unique innovation: the African knight is piously Christian and superior in every chivalric way to the knights of the Round Table. *Moriaen* even gives us an inner view of what it is like to be shunned and abhorred because you are black, and contemplates conditions under which epidermal differences should be ignored.

Texts like *Mandeville’s Travels*, the Croxton *Play of Sacrament*, Jewish boy murder stories (Chaucer’s *Priess’s Tale*, the Anglo-Norman *ballad of Hugh of Lincoln*, miracles of the Virgin tales like *The Christian Boy Killed by Jews*), and the *Siege of Jerusalem* are rich repositories of anti-Semitic content. Islamophobic texts are also not hard to find. My favorite teaching texts include the *Sultan of Babylon* and the *Song of Roland*, but Muslims are targeted more than we realize. Read Marco Polo’s *Description of the World* again, with a watchful eye to how Muslims are described and what stories are told about them, for eye-popping revelations.

The *Vinland Sagas* have a lot to say about Native Americans, and crow over exploitative trade relations with indigenous people half a millennium before Columbus. *Gerald of Wales’s* twelfth-century excoriations of the Irish demonstrate how even *fellow Christians* can be racialized—portrayed as quasi-human, savage, infantile, and bestial in the propaganda projects of settler-colonization. Read with students Gerald’s views of the Irish alongside, say, *Edmund Spenser’s* views four hundred years later, to see what, if anything, has changed in racial strategy toward the Irish from the medieval to the early modern period.
African executioner of John the Baptist, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Rouen: tympanum, north portal, west façade, c. 1260. The Menil Foundation, Houston; Hickey and Robertson, Houston; and Harvard University’s Image of the Black Project, reproduced from The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages.

Chronicles, ethnographies, travel texts, and letters are of course also the subject matter of historians. History courses can introduce students to how Urban II’s crusading address at the Council of Clermont in 1095 depicts Muslims as an unclean, polluting, infernal race from whom Christians must wrest the Holy Land. Bernard of Clairvaux’s treatise on the Templars, In Praise of the New Knighthood, goes further: it announces that killing a Muslim is not really homicide at all but malicide—the extermination of incarnated evil, not the killing of a person.

Race-making in the crucible of international war takes different forms, and centuries of holy war produced a multitude of teachable documents. An eyewitness chronicle of the First Crusade, the Gesta Francorum (Deeds of the Franks) shows how desecration of dead Muslims through piecemeal decimation of their bodies dehumanizes humans into thinghood. The First Crusade’s eyewitness chronicles also register crusader cannibalism that transforms dead Muslims into edibles, food. One chronicle, Raymond d’Aguilers’, even conceptualized the multifarious, chaotic hordes of crusaders as a single race, melded together by their religion, Christianity. Christians, it seems, are a race, too.

Historians can also scrutinize canon law and state legislature with students: to see how Canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 installed racial law in the Latin West by ordering Jews and
Muslims to mark themselves by a difference of dress. Students can go on to track how English law and statutes elaborated on this “badge of shame,” and constricted the freedom of Jewish subjects more and more—till the 1275 Statute of Jewry created de facto residential enclaves by forbidding Jews from living among Christians. Was this the beginning of the ghetto? By 1290, of course, parliamentary law drove Jews from England altogether, marking their first permanent expulsion from a European country.

Courses can teach the history of peoples like the Romani (“Gypsies”), a dark-skinned race of migrants from India in the eleventh century, who in moving westward, were enslaved in southeastern Europe. They can survey the fortunes of the Cagots, an abject people living on either side of the western Pyrenees who were shunned and abhorred. Or they can explore whether the treatment of heretics and peasants, the diseased and the disabled, ever amounted to racialization.

The possibilities are endless, and I hope that, like courses on medieval women and medieval sexualities, teaching on medieval race will soon become common.

Notes


Recommended Readings


