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Blackness, Whiteness, and the Idea of Race in Medieval European Art

Pamela A. Patton

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the challenges of studying medieval concepts of race than the image type popularly referred to as the “Black Virgin,” a loosely bounded category of sculptures, paintings, and more ephemeral modern representations—from votive candles and phone cases to tattoos—that depict the Virgin Mary with dark skin (see Figure 1). Although the medieval sculptures at the center of this tradition were once believed to have been dark-skinned when first made, recent analysis suggests that many were painted brown or black only toward or after the end of the Middle Ages; a few more may have darkened as a result of physical deterioration. When deliberate, these Virgins’ retroactive darkening sometimes reflected a desire to demonstrate antiquity or to connect with Biblical passages, such as the description of the “black but beautiful” Bride in the Song of Songs, but later, in a colonialist Europe often obsessed with race, it was readily seen as promoting conversion among non-Europeans, especially in the Americas. Today, the raciality of such dark-skinned Virgins as the Mexican



Figure 1. Nuestra Señora de Montserrat, Abbey of Montserrat. Photo: Elisa A. Foster.

Señora de Guadalupe is often perceived to be integral to such figures' identities, as well as to that of the communities that venerate them. However, whether we can apply such an understanding of race retroactively to medieval images is a more complicated question.

Was blackness racial in the Middle Ages? What meanings did it hold for medieval viewers? As the example of the Black Virgin demonstrates, modern viewers of medieval art often assume an equivalency between skin color and racial or ethnic identity that mirrors their own contemporary thinking. Yet the medieval European view of the world differed sufficiently from the modern one that this assumption should be challenged. To do this, we must ask not only how medieval artists represented race, but how they and their viewers defined race in the first place.

Medieval people certainly thought about race, but neither the concept nor the words used to represent it were quite

like those used today. The word “race” itself has a surprisingly limited medieval history: Its first use was in fifteenth-century Romance-language texts about animal breeding, and it evolved into a consistent classificatory term for people only during the eighteenth century. In the Middle Ages, as the historian Robert Bartlett has shown, writers tended instead to use words like *gens* and *natio* when classifying human groups. Neither term was used consistently, but most often, both words appear to have referred to self-constructed descent groups—that is, to “peoples” or communities that claimed both common ancestors and common habits, languages, and traditions. Such definitions may sound, and to some extent may have been, biological, but in practice the groupings that they describe were conceived predominantly on the basis of social traits such as language, religious practices, and even eating and hygiene habits. Although physical properties such as bodily appearance and family ancestry sometimes did figure into these groupings, they were not indispensable to them.

What more strongly unified the human classifications of the Middle Ages, as the literary scholar Geraldine Heng and others have suggested, was their potential not just to describe, but to delimit and essentialize specific groups of people in a way that accommodated them to a preexisting social hierarchy. People in medieval Europe were adept at classifying things, and they did not hesitate to use this talent to reinforce desired power relationships within a social structure in which they envisioned themselves at the top. The categories they created enabled them to assign status, control movement, and limit agency for groups that they identified as different from, and thus in their view inferior to, their own.

To classify outsiders as not just different but lesser had been a habit at least since ancient Greeks such as Hippo-

crates judged representatives of their own kind to be superior to the swarthy, enervated Africans and pale-skinned, dull-witted northern Europeans whom they envisioned beyond their borders. To the Greeks, such peoples' bodily extremes, including the northerners' blond hair and too-white skin, signaled moral and mental inferiority, even suitability as slaves. In neither the ancient world nor in the medieval one did the lack of a clear biological rationale for such thinking discourage preferential views and practices that modern people might describe as racist. In this essay, I use the word "race," despite its linguistic anachronism, to emphasize this point.

Medieval ideas about skin color were nearly as complex. Both actual and depicted skin color were understood by medieval beholders to bear a wide range of meanings that only rarely related explicitly to racial identity. The brown, black, blue, gray, and even purple hues chosen by artists to portray dark-skinned figures more often signaled abstract social or moral qualities understood as distinct from ethnicity. Among the most common of these was evil or sinfulness, connotations traceable to early Christian theologians who saw blackness as a metaphor for sin and the devil. In their writings, moral blackness became a metaphor so powerful that they could describe the newly baptized as literally whitened by the washing away of their sins. Similar thinking inspired monastic accounts of dramatic visionary temptations by black "Ethiopian" demons that medieval artists sometimes portrayed as dark-skinned human figures that resembled, but in truth had very little to do with, actual African people.

The strength of this skin-sin connection is confirmed, rather paradoxically, by the few but important instances of saintly figures whom medieval artists traditionally depicted as black. These included the Biblical Queen of Sheba, whose journey to hear King Solomon's wisdom was seen as

Figure 2. Portrait sculpture of Saint Maurice, ca. 1240, Magdeburg Cathedral. Photo: Hickey & Robertson, Houston / The Menil Foundation.



a model for pagan conversion, and the medieval saint Maurice, the Theban soldier whose steadfast Christianity legendarily earned him martyrdom (see Figure 2). Although the depiction of these two figures with dark skin must have been understood on one level as related to their foreign origin—Sheba in Ethiopia and Maurice in Egypt—a medieval viewer steeped in Christian symbolic traditions also would have understood it to suggest the moral limitations that these figures overcame in pursuit of spiritual truth.

Dark-skinned foreigners such as Sheba and Maurice illustrate a second medieval connotation of blackness: its implication of geographical origins beyond the European medieval world. This distance automatically implied a potential for enmity and danger, since the distant lands in

which such dark-skinned peoples were commonly thought to live, including India and Ethiopia, were also believed to be home to even more foreign and frightening beings, such as the Monstrous Races described there by ancient authors such as the ancient Roman naturalist and historian Pliny the Elder. The medieval authors influenced by Pliny associated these creatures' bodily peculiarities, from the single foot of the Sciapod to the chest-faces of headless Blemmyae, with negative moral traits, such as aggression, idolatry, and various other moral excesses, characteristics that compounded the sinfulness already assigned to their dark-skinned human neighbors.

Such syllogistic reasoning, and the dark color that came with it, could also extend to other groups perceived as foreign or threatening to those living in Europe. From the twelfth century onward, for example, medieval European artists increasingly chose to depict Muslims as dark-skinned figures despite the fact that most Muslims they encountered would have been medium- to light-complexioned. The Muslim cavalryman shown fighting a Christian knight in the fourteenth-century Luttrell Psalter offers a case in point (see Figure 3). Like many of the marginal images in this luxurious prayer book, the scene does not directly illustrate the adjacent psalm text (Psalm 41); instead, it portrays a knight who is often identified as the twelfth-century Muslim leader Saladin facing the English crusader king Richard I. The figure's fantastically blue skin, sneering expression, and ludicrous helmet lend him an air of the monstrous, while the African head points to his "foreign" origins. That the Muslims who held the Holy Land at the time when this image was made were primarily light-skinned Mamluks seems to have concerned the Psalter's artist and viewers very little: For them, Saladin's dark skin operated on other symbolic fronts, suggesting religious antagonism, geographical distance, and



Figure 3. Jousting scene, Luttrell Psalter, 1325–35. London, British Library, Add. MS 42130, fol. 82r.

the potential for violence that continued to be associated with Muslims by fourteenth-century Christians captivated by the concept of crusading.

Depicted dark skin also could signal low social status, including servitude or slavery. This visual convention had roots in ancient Roman art, where dark skin was often combined with stereotyped African features to create such stock figures as the black bath attendant or black camel driver. While these types had, to some extent, reflected the actual practice of owning black slaves in parts of the Roman empire, such slavery became far less common in Europe for most of the Middle Ages. In medieval art, the figure of the black slave instead became an abstract stereotype capable of representing all manner of subordinates, from executioners and infantrymen to musicians and household servants. In

many such images, the implication of low status overlapped with other well-established connotations of dark skin, such as foreignness or religious difference. In a historiated initial in the ca. 1300 law code known as the *Vidal Mayor* or *Fuero de Aragón*, the dark skin of the two runaway slaves presented to the king thus would have been understood by their Spanish Christian viewers as reflecting both their subordinate status and their religious identity (see Figure 4).

As noted, the readiness with which medieval artists envisioned slaves to be dark-skinned belied medieval reality for most of the Middle Ages. In contrast to the Islamic world, to which trans-Saharan trade imported black slaves in some numbers, relatively few slaves held in Europe were black until the mid-fifteenth century, when Portuguese exploration of the African coast initiated the regular importation of enslaved Africans. Before that time, Europe's demand for slaves generally was met either through the subordination of local captives after military conquests or through trade with the east, especially the Balkan region; in either case, such slaves were usually light-skinned. The convention of the black African slave in European medieval imagery, then, remained primarily a figment derived from Roman artistic traditions, fed by the negative connotations linked with dark skin in medieval culture, and possibly bolstered by a dim awareness of slavery practices in the Islamic world.

The one context in which medieval artists do seem to have linked skin color with actual physical appearance was in the portrayal of individuals from geographical regions that those in Europe either knew or believed to be inhabited by black people, chiefly Egypt, Ethiopia, and other parts of Africa. Depictions of such figures often combine dark skin with quasi-racializing features, such as curly hair or full lips, as in the portrait of the famous king of Mali, Mansa Musa (reigned ca. 1312–ca. 1337), in the world map of the so-called

Figure 4. Initial Q depicting Muslim slaves apprehended, Vidal Mayor ("Fuero de Aragon"), ca. 1300. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, MS Ludwig XIV 6, fol. 244r. Photo: Courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.



Catalan Atlas (see Figure 5). Produced in Mallorca around 1375 by the Jewish cartographer Abraham Cresques, the Atlas contains cosmological texts and a world map partly based on navigational charts. In the section representing Africa, the Malian king, described in a nearby inscription as “Musse Melly . . . sovereign of the land of the negroes in Gineva (Ghana),” sits on a cushioned throne, wearing a Gothic-style crown and holding a scepter and golden orb in reference to his royal power and the gold mines he famously controlled. His skin is medium brown, lightly modeled with gray and outlined in black; his hair and beard are tightly curled; and his profile includes the low-bridged nose and full lips common in European stereotypes of Africans. Since Musa had died in Mali half a century before the Aragonese map was produced, his likeness must be a fabrication, but it convincingly links his dark skin and Africanized stereotype with a specific geographical locus and, by extension, with his *gens*, or “people.”

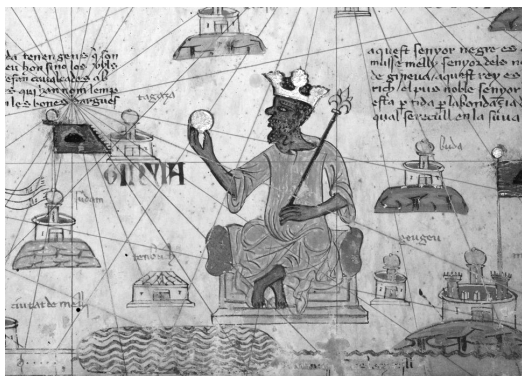


Figure 5. Portrait of Mansa Musa in the Catalan Atlas of Abraham Cresques, 1375. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Esp. 30, Fol. III.

The examples discussed here illustrate how few of the meanings borne by skin color in medieval art were clearly related to race, at least as modern viewers would define it. Except in cases such as Mansa Musa or other figures from certain African regions, medieval artists did not consistently associate dark skin color with specific cultural or ethnic groups. Instead, and more important in understanding the visual traditions that would follow, is that they consistently imputed a set of negative values—sinfulness, foreignness, violence, and social inferiority—to the possessors of dark skin. This allowed skin color to function, then, not as a specifically racial marker but as an implement of racist thinking.

This strategy is also attested by the ways in which medieval artists in Europe handled the opposite of blackness: whiteness. By the later Middle Ages, the idealized, pale-skinned features of Gothic figures could serve as shorthand signs for moral purity, social elevation, and political authority. Paralleling the snowy-white princesses of medieval romance literature (themselves forerunners of our modern Snow White and similar heroines), such figures combined starkly whitened skin with other positive social markers,

such as attenuated proportions, graceful gestures, and costly clothing, that asserted their superior status. Although medieval artists' treatment of blackness and whiteness in such cases cannot be described as racial in the strictest modern sense, their stark alignment of skin color with the moral, social, and personal values of their day stands uncomfortably close to the racism and colorism of the modern world.

For medieval artists, it would seem, dark skin was both less and more racial than we might expect it to be. While its power to signal race *qua* race remained relatively weak, it inflected medieval imagery with social, religious, and moral connotations that foreshadowed modern racial thinking in ways easily missed, or misconstrued, by modern viewers. Dark skin could be racial in the Middle Ages, but much more often it was not; either way, it facilitated the organization of culture in ways that many would describe as racist. To pause and consider this paradox serves real purpose for a modern world still grappling with its own embedded yet shifting conceptions of racial identity. Like the Black Virgin itself, the complex significance of skin color in medieval art counters the self-reinforcing assumption that medieval people's values simply mirrored our own. Instead, it reveals and challenges the mechanisms beneath both medieval and modern notions of race, difference, and self.

Further Reading

Robert Bartlett's discussion of the linguistic and conceptual differences that complicate modern understanding of medieval ideas about race, updating work in his earlier publications, appears in "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001): 39–56. A broad-ranging argument that racial thinking and practices, based on a variety

of bodily and cultural factors, already existed in the Middle Ages is made by Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For analysis of the ways in which medieval artists signaled both human and monstrous difference, see the influential study by Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003). An important resource for the study of dark skin in medieval art is David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates, and Karen C. C. Dalton, eds., *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2010); originally published between 1976–89, this work has been updated in the new edition with the addition of several new essays. On the variable connotations of blackness in the artistic genre known as the “Black Virgin” and a brief discussion of when such sculptures acquired their color, see Elisa A. Foster, “The Black Madonna of Montserrat: An Exception to Concepts of Dark Skin in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia?” in *Envisioning Others: Race, Color, and the Visual in Iberia and Latin America*, edited by Pamela A. Patton (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 18–50.