# 7

# Race

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The popular romance *Guy of Warwick* contains what should have been an almost unremarkable incident: a heroic knight defeats a brutal giant. Such episodes are ubiquitous in Middle English texts: *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, and *The Sultan (Sowdone) of Babylone*, among others. Yet something about this particular encounter proved so fascinating that the battle assumed a life of its own. Sir Guy has just returned to England from the Holy Land, where he has purged himself of youthful errors and proved well suited to crusade-inspired violence against Saracens (a medieval designation for Muslims). The bellicose Anlaf of Denmark invades the island with his army. His deadliest weapon is an African giant named Colbrond. On behalf of England's king, Guy agrees to meet this monster in single combat, the victor determining his nation's fate. A brutal clash ensues. Guy eventually prevails, cuts off the giant's head, and scatters the Danish enemy. The narrative of this well-precedented duel – a small episode within the romance's sprawling narrative – circulated as a song, a Latin prose rendition, a painting in Winchester cathedral, and a fast-paced poem (*Guy and Colbrond*, in the Percy Folio (British Library MS. Additional 27879)). Absorbed quickly into the English historical tradition, the story appears in numerous chronicles, from Robert Mannyng of Brunne to Holinshed.

Enthusiasm for the battle of Guy against Colbrond owes much to its energetic reduction of the world's messiness into clean binaries. The romance takes an almost clichéd encounter of knight and giant and hones the clash to a stark meeting of opposed identities, propelled by nationalism and crusading vigor. A Christian warrior transformed on domestic shores into a hero for the kingdom, Guy triumphs against an enemy whose only thought is "þe Inglisse for to quelle" ("to kill the English," *Romance*, 255.10). His victory purges English history of its inconvenient

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Danish and Norman content; both these groups had conquered the kingdom in the past, and both had been absorbed into its population. Guy aligns proper Christianity with his assertive Englishness by accomplishing a second crusade at home. Just as he defeated a "blake sarzine" giant named Amourant in the Holy Land, so he vanquishes the African Colbrond. The skin color of these monsters is not accidental. Their darkness is aligned with demonic as well as geographic origin, theology along with place-determined race. The Colbrond episode depends heavily upon a series of identities that suture together history, nation, religion, and collective designation: African, Saracen, Christian, English, Danish.

Like all supposedly clean divisions, however, those in *Guy of Warwick* hide complexly entangled realities. The mercenary giant Colbrond likely derives from the African king Gormundus in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (*c.*1136). With its charismatic depiction of the Arthurian court, this wildly popular Latin text bequeathed to the Middle Ages its most vibrant mythology, the seeds of the stories that would become narratives like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Gormundus and his army of thousands ravage Britain, whose aboriginal population (the Britons, descended from Trojans and destined to become the Welsh) Geoffrey celebrates. The merciless African bestows portions of the conquered island to the Saxons, the people who will in time become the English . . . and who will also in time assimilate Geoffrey's British version of King Arthur into a resolutely Anglophone and Anglophile monarch. Behind the giant Colbrond therefore lurk issues of Welsh versus English identity, and a postcolonial struggle for insular dominance. Geoffrey of Monmouth in turn took this African king from a French text, *Gormont et Isembart*, in which Gormont is a Saracen devastating *Angleterre*. He allies himself with Isembart, the son of the king of France, who renounces his Christianity to assist the heathen warrior. The *chanson de geste* may derive from a historical episode having nothing to do with England: the defeat of belligerent Norsemen by Louis III in France in 881 (Hasenohr and Zink 554). African Gormundus may be the Danish king Guthrum, a transformation that echoes a similar one in *King Horn*, where Danes are likewise transmuted into Saracens. In both cases a people intimate to England through the Danelaw become perilous aliens. Adding to these cultural peregrinations of Colbrond, moreover, in a Latin text composed shortly after Geoffrey of Monmouth (*De Ortu Waluuanii*), Gormundus becomes a large Persian king.

With his dark complexion, African origin, connection to Islam, and exaggerated physicality, Colbrond possesses what most modern interpreters would recognize as a racialized body. As for the swarming Saracens of the romance *The Sultan of Babylone* ("soom bloo, soom yolowe, some blake as More," l. 1005), difference is written on the skin. Yet the English, Norse, French, Danes, and Britons are not neutral or unmarked national groups. The moment they find themselves in proximity to such an exorbitantly visual display of otherness as that incarnated in the giant, their own difference is likewise established, performed, and interrogated. What the shifting versions of Colbrond suggest is that *all* identities are racialized, even as a dominating group deploys some monstrous Other to cloak themselves in a

"default" or "normate" body (a body never given in advance, but produced through contact with and concomitant production of deviant bodies). In a trenchant essay on late medieval race Geraldine Heng observes:

> Race makes an appearance in the late Middle Ages not only through fantasmatic blacks, historical Jews and the collections of hybrid humans pressing on the edges of civilization, but can also be found at the centre of things, in the creation of that strange creature who is nowhere, yet everywhere, in cultural discourse: the white Christian European. ("Jews, Saracens, 'Black Men,' Tartars," 265)

Europeans blanche as the Saracens darken. Medieval race may certainly involve skin color, as it does with Colbrond, yet race cannot be reduced to any of its multiple signs. Religion, descent, custom, law, language, monstrosity, geographical origin, and species are essential to the construction of medieval race. Although inextricably corporeal, race is also performative, a phenomenon of the body in motion. Such restless bodies are therefore always also becoming something else, something unexpected: from pillaging Normans to England-invading Saracens to exotic Africans to Danes with giants, all the while troubling what it means to possess and to retain an identity that prefers to remain unremarked.

## Thinking about Race

R. R. Davies argued throughout his work for British history over English. He insisted that narrating the island's past from an Anglocentric point of view impoverishes that expanse, erasing its complexity. Wales, Scotland, and Ireland are not peripheral geographies, not secondary characters who enter insular action from time to time as England expands, but fully involved centers within an intricate and disunited expanse. Medieval British history is a precocious form of multiculturalism: not placid coexistence or mere celebration of difference, but a turbulent living together that relentlessly brings into view the competition between the peoples who inhabit the islands, as well as the hybridities that arise inevitably in their contact zones. Recent medievalists have gone farther, describing an *archipelagic* approach to medieval Britain in which all of those who touched the islands – historically, imaginatively, through war, through Crusade, through trade, through literature – are allowed a presence in its history. At a minimum, that archipelago would include Romans, Britons, Picts, Scots, the English, Normans, the French, Bretons, the Irish, Jews, Saracens, Flemings, and Danes. Most of these groups are problematic unities. Trace any far enough back into history and they dissolve into loose and culturally mixed confederations; trace them even farther and they vanish completely. Yet this multiplicitous approach connects the present strongly to the past, deprives majority history of inevitability and superiority, and reminds that identity is carried in the flesh.

No taxonomy is neutral. To classify peoples is to judge them, to sort the world in ways that typically buttress the privileges of a dominating collective.

Medieval texts reflect and participate in the creation of human hierarchies with lived effects. Many words might be used to describe the groups that result from such ordering: ethnicities, cultures, populations, peoples. Because disinterestedness seldom motivates the taxonomic impulse, however, *race* better emphasizes that classification of humans into groups is both productive and inequitable. Race is a word often rejected by medievalists because of its association with the body and with injustice. Although it has no inherent connection to either, it is always haunted by both, making it the only noun adequate to convey the way in which group identity was imagined and experienced in late medieval Britain and recorded in Middle English texts. Distinctions among the world's peoples were typically believed to be congenital, the material and permanent impress of geography, climate, and phenomena that today we would label cultural. *Race* foregrounds the inextricability of corporeal and group identity, as well as the uneven structures of power within which identities are made solid. Race belongs to the realm of fantasy, where it demonstrates a powerful ability to give substance to what is ultimately insubstantial. Despite its seemingly chimerical nature, however, race is bluntly corporeal: an identity system that anchors difference to the body, frequently through physical signs like the shape of one's nose, contours of lips, texture of hair, variations in dermal pigmentation, embodied otherness. Medieval manuscripts thus depict hook-nosed Jews menacing the crucified Christ and monstrously dark Saracens battling crusaders. Yet race is not some lifeless residuum, some essence discernable only through the observation of faces and skin. Race is embodied performance. Medieval ethnographers "discovered" race most frequently in the vivacious realm of what might be called corporeal practice, where it exerts a constant power to differentiate and reveal. Race is evinced in such highly visible actions as the choice, preparation and consumption of food; patterns of speech and use of language; law; customs and ritual; and practice of sexuality.

Race is paradoxical. Although it may seem an impermeable boundary, solid and constraining, timeless and natural, over time race tends to be elastic, altering its contours as its demarcative power is adapted to specific uses. The performability of race may allow a previously divided or heterogeneous group to cohere. It can also enable the foisting of such union upon peoples who do not desire such delineation. Should this group then find themselves subordinated politically, race then tends to harden into an imprisoning category, locking them in alien terms and subaltern status. Embrace of a racial designator by a dominating group, on the other hand, frequently relies upon the potential plasticity of the category, enabling a series of strategic inclusions and exclusions according to political expedience. In medieval Britain the Welsh, Irish, and to a lesser degree the Scots found themselves trapped in the suffocating embrace of an English circumscription of their racial identity. The Normans, meanwhile, insinuated themselves into the Englishness of the nation they had conquered in 1066, eventually disappearing into that identity and strengthening its insular dominance.

Race is a sorting mechanism. Its power to differentiate and hierarchize can be glimpsed in some of the earliest writing about cultural clash in Britain, the

*Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* of Julius Caesar. A century or so thereafter, when Britain had become a distant province of the Roman empire, Cornelius Tacitus composed the *Agricola*, a narrative in which Britain is clearly divided between conquering Romans and the tribes who either wisely submit or foolishly rebel. Reality was rather different. As in any frontier society, cultural separation is difficult to maintain. Britons were slowly Romanized, while citizens of the empire settled into newly built villas felt the pull of indigenous ways. Yet the *Agricola* confidently envisions an island where distinctions remain keenly self-evident. Tacitus famously praised the solitude of the races when in his *Germania* he composed a sympathetic account of a barbarian people who limned the edges of the Latin world. Later nationalists saw themselves in Tacitus's description: just as separate, just as pure. No matter that Tacitus was describing a people who could not have bestowed some unalloyed cultural or genetic heritage to modern Germany. The Germans that Tacitus records were undoubtedly a mongrel solidarity who would in time promiscuously intermingle with other peoples. Yet what mattered was that he rendered them, like the Britons and the Romans, a race set neatly apart. The *Germania* is not an unbiased ethnography but a work composed to reform the morals of the contemporary empire. Little did Tacitus know that he was introducing a fantasy of race in which the National Socialists would one day espy a *Blut und Boden* to anchor their present to an uncontaminated past, an "eternal stream of blood" that "binds across the ages" (Moreland 23).

The later history of Tacitus's dream of racial purity underscores the perils race poses. With the aftermath of the Holocaust, European colonialism, and chattel slavery still palpable, using the term *race* invokes some of the most damaging systems, discourses and regimes that humans have deployed. Not only does the word seem innately pernicious, its potential applicability to the analysis of the Middle Ages is suspect. *Die Endlösung* (the Final Solution) may have had a parallel in medieval pogroms, especially the wholesale expulsion of Jews from England in 1290. It may also be the case, however, that yoking such events to each other inhibits our ability to understand the specific historical conditions under which such hostility arises. "Race" seems to resist such small-scale analysis.

It could also be maintained that a period that did not inherit the legacy of institutionalized slavery based upon skin color could not possibly have conceptualized race in our contemporary sense of the word. Perhaps, after all, scholars ought to employ some other, less tainted term to describe medieval collectivities. The historian Robert Bartlett states that since race was not a biological category for medieval people, and since "ethnicity and race both refer to the identifications made by individuals about the groups they belong to" ("Medieval and Modern Concepts," 41), the words ought to be treated as synonyms. William Chester Jordan, on the other hand, rejects this easy equivalence: "Bartlett suggests that we cannot leave the word *race* to the racists . . . However, Bartlett's pleas notwithstanding, on the matter of race, the racists *have* won. Let them keep the word" (168). Employing race in medieval contexts, Jordan argues, will inevitably attract the modern associations that render it repugnant. Ethnicity, he continues, does not carry this

taint, and better conveys the fact that identity formation is open-ended, perpetually in process.

Indeed, ethnicity seems the preferred term at the moment, especially among the medievalists who investigate the Age of Migrations, the period that in Britain saw the arrival of the people who became the English. It used to be assumed, as the medieval sources insist, that as the remnants of the Roman empire dissolved, Europe was invaded by new, culturally homogeneous groups of people. The large-scale movements of these barbarians, it was thought, wholly displaced aboriginal populations. Thus the Angles and Saxons arrived from northern Europe and pushed away the Britons, christening them the Welsh and circumscribing their dominion to the southwest of the island. Scholars like Walter Pohl, however, have emphasized ethnogenesis, mapping the adoptability of collective identities over time. Ethnogenesis typically occurs as a minority warrior elite imposes its culture upon a subjugated population. Invaded peoples are not eradicated but absorbed. Much research on the groups who eventually became known as the Britons, the Anglo-Saxons (that is, the English), the Normans, and the Danes of the Danelaw stresses that the number of immigrants to the British Islands was likely to have been small. Freshly arriving warriors would have intermarried with the indigenous populations, impressing upon them their art, religion, customs, language, and culture, making it appear that what was in biological fact a mixed community constituted a fairly unified group of "Britons" or "Angles." To underscore the malleability of these group identities and their origins in adoptable culture, the plastic term *ethnicity* is used rather than the intractably physical noun *race*.

So why adopt a word so troubled and so dangerous in its contemporary meanings to examine the groups of people we encounter in Middle English texts? Following Jordan and Pohl, dissimilarities among the Welsh, the Normans, the Scots, the Irish and the English, it could be argued, are exclusively ethnic differences, if *ethnicity* is the proper term to describe the nonbiological variations which distinguish population groups, and if *race* refers to the distribution (real or imagined) of corporeal markers throughout human populations. Ethnicity, it seems, is identity as expressed in culture. Race, on the other hand, is identity lodged in the body, no matter how speciously. Ethnicity is adoptable, malleable, and ethically neutral. Race is enfleshed, immutable, and haunted by pernicious history. Yet to differentiate by asserting that ethnicity is free-floating and socially constructed while race is obdurately corporeal engenders immense difficulties. When the Greeks and Romans described the Ethiopians, Indians, Germans and Celts, they were in general not only conveying that these peoples varied from them in language, customs, and geographic origin, but asserting their own cultural, intellectual, and physical superiority. The humoral and environmental model of biological determinism was inherited by the Middle Ages, taking on a renewed vitality as classical texts were translated from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth century. Even today, ethnicity is still popularly tied to readable bodily designators, and seldom in practice retains its supposedly judgment-free status. We could not have the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing if ethnicity were merely a neutral word for cultural variation. Indeed, it

is impossible to imagine any term that hopes to delineate group differences (real or imagined) that could be disinterested or apolitical. No matter how cultural in their origin, differences among medieval peoples were inevitably imagined in somatic terms, employing language that attached difference in customs, laws, and language to the body. The word race better serves analysis of medieval Britain than ethnicity because it emphasizes the sheer embodiedness of group differentiation. This demarcative process involves differences imagined as innate (such as national character), differences in biology (such as humoral imbalance), differences in bodily features (such as dark skin or a hooked nose), differences in descent or origin still evident in contemporary identity, and especially differences that are visible only as they are performed by bodies in motion (ritual, custom, legal or hospitality codes not in their abstract existence but in their concrete expression).

Despite an enduring interest in how communities form and sustain themselves, medievalists are only now turning to investigations that foreground *race* in the Middle Ages in ways invigorated by conversations with critical race theory. Recent work in medieval studies employs contemporary theory in order to reject nationalist fantasies of eternal purity and explore how race comes into being (Hahn). Medievalists like Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Geraldine Heng, Sharon Kinoshita, Stephen Kruger, and Lisa Lampert (among many others) grant race its instability, its contextual determination, its power of mutability. They employ *race* critically, not as a throwback to the racist ethnographies and philological nationalisms of the not too distant past. This use is inspired by the cautious deployment of the term in anthropology and critical race studies, where race is a described as a shifting, ultimately non-reifiable category that nonetheless passes itself off as possessing an essence and a historical durability. A cultural product that seems in some ways artificial and abstract, race is nonetheless bound to the flesh – not because the body will (as racialists believe) always betray the congenital signs that allow natural categorizations, but because the body is the battleground where identities are perpetually sought, forced, expressed. Race has no preexistent truth that awaits recognition. Race is instead the product of a discriminatory system of power that intertwines identity and embodiment.

In the introduction to her study of racial passing in American culture, Gayle Wald usefully summarizes the common ground of much recent work in critical race studies: a rejection of biological and physiological models of racial sorting; an insistence upon race's historical mutability; and an interest in the social mechanisms through which race becomes real and takes on a life of its own (Wald 6–7). Critical race theorists reject the supposed self-evident truth of biological, physiological, and other ontological models of racial classification; insist upon race's liquidity, dynamism, and historical contingency; and interest themselves in the mechanisms through which race is made real, especially law, narrative and the visual arts. Though such studies most frequently focus upon the construction of subaltern races, these truths apply no less to those for whom race is empowering. The African-American novelist Charles W. Chesnutt wrote in 1900 that "We make our customs lightly; once made, like our sins, they grip us in bands of steel; we become the creatures of our creation" (*The House behind the Cedars*, quoted by Wald 10). These bands of

custom, Wald observes, are rather like the constrictions of race: "forged in history rather than nature, allowing them to change and adapt over time . . . impos[ing] social distinctions whose power supersedes the fluidity and arbitrariness of racial representation. Indeed, it is precisely *because* it operates through representation that race acquires its authority to define" (10–11).

Race, in other words, might have no pregiven or unmediated reality, but that does not mean it is insubstantial or disembodied. History and culture produce, delimit, and incorporate race, just as these same forces materialize sexed and gendered bodies. Race never exists as some intellectual abstraction but always takes restrictive physical form. A bluntly physical system with grave human consequences, race is as solid as Chesnutt's chain of custom, an effective and enduring means to privilege some groups, denigrate and disempower others. Race is not rendered useless because it is so highly charged, so inevitably haunted by racism. Because it can never be morally diffident, because history has ensured that it is inextricable from hierarchy and injustice, and because it is at once mutable and permanent, race captures the differentiation of medieval peoples far better than more innocuous terms.

## The Composition of Medieval Race

Race is a composite category, gathering into seeming unity ambivalent and often contradictory elements.[1] Race is most vividly glimpsed during moments of crisis, emerging within struggles over power both manifest and intangible: control of government, land, and textual production; possession of status; the right to narrate one's own history. Because of its performative nature, race is never easily reduced to some list of constituent elements. No catalog captures its dispersed expansiveness. Yet race also elicits a taxonomic impulse, inspiring scholars medieval and modern to compose lists of the world's peoples that emphasize their separations. For his influential model of medieval race Robert Bartlett turned to a tenth-century Benedictine abbot, Regino of Prüm, who held that different races possess distinguishing customs, language, law, and descent. Arguing that biological racism is the preoccupation of a later age, Bartlett emphasizes the first three of these determinants, all of which seem disembodied. Because they are not innate, they also change over time. Hairstyle, juridical codes, dress, foodways, names, and even language are easily absorbed from neighboring or dominating cultures. Thus the Statutes of Kilkenny were enacted in 1366 to prevent the English in Ireland from going native. They forbade the adoption of Irish language, names, fashions, and manner of horse-riding, indicating that such assimilation was in fact endemic. The adoptability of the visual signifiers of race could also enable instances of passing, as when a group of Muslims shaved their beards, donned Frankish vestments, and placed pigs on their ships to circumvent the blockade of Acre. Western identity is displayed here as facial hair, sartorial choice, and the consumption of certain animals (Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings," 59). Because language, custom, and law are neither innate nor inalterable, Bartlett's notion of medieval race seems to have

little to do with medieval bodies. Yet what all three of Regino's racial markers share with descent is their inextricable relation to corporeality. They are all somatic practices, and they could therefore be seen as congenital, the gifts of both history and geographical origin. Their power to differentiate unfolds only through fleshly performance. When the English met the Normans at the Battle of Hastings, before a word left either army's mouth it was spectacularly obvious who belonged to which people: insular natives had flowing locks and moustaches, invaders wore their hair short and shaved their beards. William of Malmesbury recounts that spies sent by King Harold to reconnoiter the enemy camp reported that the Norman army was composed of priests because of their relative hairlessness.

Although *race* is etymologically related to Latin and romance terms denoting descent, the word has no exact medieval equivalent. The word from Regino of Prüm that Bartlett translates as race is *natio*. *Gens*, *genus*, and *stirps* are other common Latin nouns rendered into English as "race," but in many instances the words could also be glossed by *nation, people, ethnic identity, linguistic community*, or *kin group*. Yet even a word as seemingly familiar as *natio* implies in a medieval context not an ideological entity like the United States, with its idea of a shared geography whose diverse population nonetheless constitutes a single community. The encyclopedist Isidore of Seville (*c*.560–636) therefore linked group identity with genetic descent when he wrote:

> A nation [*gens*] is a number of people sharing a single origin, or distinguished from another nation [*natio*] in accordance with its grouping . . . The words gens is also so called on account of the generations [*generatio*] of families, that is from "begetting" [*gignere*, ppl. *genitus*], as the term "nation" [*natio*] comes from being born [*nasci*]. (IX.ii.1)

A medieval *natio* need be nothing more than a group of people linked by their common descent. *Natio* and its vernacular equivalents like the Middle English noun *nacioun* derive from the verb *nasci*, "to be born." The word therefore carries corporeal implications.

Although true to one canonist's vision of collective identity, Bartlett's list is not nearly expansive enough. Because race is intimately related to social status, economic class was typically demarcated along racial lines. Rural dwellers and the poor might be imagined as having descended exclusively from a subordinated group. Discourses of species and monstrosity were perpetually entwined within the language of race, with peoples imagined as inferior frequently depicted as bestial or inhuman. Race also consistently possessed theological undertones. Medieval Jews, Muslims, and Christians witnessed tremendous internal heterogeneity in the practice of their faiths, yet all three groups were confident that they possessed the only true knowledge of the divine. This difference, they held, set them apart. The imagined unity of each religion also offered a potent ideological tool. That all Christians could be supposed to constitute a single Latin race was a sentiment that proved useful in promulgating the crusades. According to this logic Jews and

Saracens were different not because they had darker skin or distinguishing facial features, but because they practiced inferior ritual and held to an alien creed. In theory baptism could completely transform an unbeliever, as when in the *King of Tars* the skin of a Saracen king changes from black to white at the font.[2] In practice, however, converts had a difficult time convincing their new coreligionists that they had changed internally. The tight connection between race and religion, moreover, inevitably effaced heterogeneity within groups imagined as inhabiting supposedly inferior categories. Latin Christians classified as Saracens a diverse array of Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs, Turks, Armenians, Kurds, and non-Western Christians (Nestorians, Jacobites, Maronites). Arab chroniclers narrating the crusader invasion of their lands typically referred to the polyglot and multiethnic arrivals from Europe as the *Franj*, mainly because most of their leaders possessed a *lingua franca* in French. Language was of the utmost importance in the determination of race: Isidore of Seville, who provided one of the most influential surveys of the world's peoples in his *Etymologies*, stated crisply "Nations arose from languages, and not languages from nations" (IX.i.14).

Medieval theories of astrological influence, climatology, and physiology ensured that the differences delimiting one people from another were intractably enfleshed. Galen's medical argument that the body's health was maintained by the distribution of four vital fluids was especially influential, intertwining climate and body in what has been called geohumoralism.[3] The temperateness or inclemency of a location and the position of the astral bodies above its skies were thought to impress themselves profoundly and enduringly on the character of that land's inhabitants, as well as their physiology. Climate and celestial influence determined the distribution of the four vital fluids thought to hold sway over personality. Geographical origin therefore stood at the genesis of collective physical identities and group psychologies. Isidore writes: "People's faces and coloring, the size of their bodies, and their various temperaments correspond to various climates" (IX.ii.105). Thus the African Moors, "blasted by blistering heat," have dark skin (IX.ii.120); the Germans, "hardened by very severe cold," are savage and large bodied (IX.ii.97). Albertus Magnus (*c*.1206–1280) describes the impress of African climate upon the Ethiopian body: "Their flesh is suffused with blood as if they are glowing coals . . . They have prominent mouths, thick lips, reddened eyes, veins and eye lids" (*De natura locorum*, 2.3; Tilmann 101). Bartholomaeus Anglicus, whose Latin encyclopedia *De proprietatibus rerum (On the Properties of Things)* was translated into Middle English by John Trevisa, linked the effects of the African sun on indigenous flesh with a psychological deficiency: "the sonne abideth long over the Affers, men of Affrica, and brennen and wasten humours and maken ham short of body, blacke of face, with crispe here. And for here spirites passe oute at pores that ben open, so they be more cowardes of herte" (*On the Properties of Things* 2:752–753). Other writers went further, rendering this solar-induced lack of spirit a religious deficiency. In contrast, frigidity for Bartholomaeus engendered whiteness, with the pale skin of northerners signifying innate valor: a presciently modern white/black racial dichotomy based on skin color, geography, and soul. Just as in the modern binarism, moreover, the existence of positive representations of dark-skinned people (St. Maurice, the magi Balthazar,

Prester John, the Queen of Sheba, the Ethiopian wife of Moses) had a tendency to reaffirm the duality rather than undercut it, exceptions to prove the general rule.

Differences among medieval races were imagined in relentlessly corporeal terms. Yet that racialized body was forever connecting to other bodies, seemingly solid while constantly changing. Race may seem to partition the world into tidy categories of difference, yet – as we saw with the cultural peregrinations of Colbrond at this essay's opening – upon closer examination such taxonomies typically reveal an unsettled expanse of hybridity and contradiction.

## In Between

The fourteenth-century Middle English romance *King of Tars* well illustrates the subterranean complexities of race in Middle English texts.[4] The narrative takes its name from the monarch of the Christian kingdom of Tars, "a trewe Cristen king" (l. 5) whose daughter is so radiant that the Saracen sultan of Damascus declares he must possess her. This unnamed princess is remarkable for her color, "as white as feþer of swan" (l. 12). The skin ("hide") of her would-be husband, meanwhile, is "blac & loþely" (l. 928). A black Sultan, it seems, will naturally desire the superior beauty of a white princess. So overcome by passion is he that the Sultan wages fierce war: he is willing to murder thousands to seize her. Racialized binaries structure the narrative. "Kende" is the text's term for race, a capacious Middle English noun with meanings that include family, descent, natural inclination, gender, temperament, inherent qualities, moral disposition, class, and ideal bodily form. As differing "kendes," Christians and Saracens are represented as at once kinship groups, cultures, body types, and religions. The racial line quickly becomes entangled in species difference as well. The "soudan wild" (l. 404) is repeatedly described through bestial metaphors. When he cannot obtain the princess he rages "also a wilde bore" (l. 98) and "as a lyoun" (l. 105). His men are "heþen houndes" who exult in the shedding of Christian blood. When the princess dreams of Saracens, they are figured as "an hundred houndes blake." They chase her as if she were their prey, and their language as they pursue her through the dream amounts only to an incomprehensible bark. The same oneiric Saracens are also figured as dark demons, commingling the animal vocabulary for race with its theological counterpart. By contrast, the Jesus figure in the princess's nightmare arrives "in white cloþes" (l. 451). He speaks good English. The sultan's voracious appetite, meanwhile, is stressed throughout the romance. We often witness him at feasts, while the Christians barely seem to eat. Though his wealth is immense, he is perpetually in thrall to his possessions. The princess is yet another thing for him to collect, as well as the victim of his racialized libidinousness.

To bring an end to Christian bloodshed, the daughter of the king of Tars is given to the sultan as a bride. She pretends to convert to the faith of her new husband as he demands, but remains unchanged in her soul. So keen do the differences of *kende* that separate the Christians from the Saracens remain, moreover, that after the princess and the sultan consummate their marriage, their baby is born a mere

"rond of flesche" (l. 580). The shapeless lump possesses no blood, no bone, not even the barest of life (ll. 585, 639). This body without form is described through lithic metaphors like "ded as þe ston" and "stille as ston": it (for this thing possesses no gender, no race, no individuation) may as well be inorganic. Between Christian and Saracen, between black and white, "bitven ous to" (l. 604), no intermediate form exists. These polarized worlds may be traversed, but in sudden movements that engender complete metamorphosis rather than difficult hybridities. The sultan will eventually accept baptism, and his skin will blanche to radiant white ("chaunged was his hewe," l. 945). The christened lump of flesh assumes the contours of a proper child: "when þat it cristned was/ It hadde liif & lim & fas" (ll. 776–777). The sultan becomes Cleophas, and the lump child a beautiful boy named John. Such utter transformations only stress the uninhabitable chasm that separates the racialized groups.

Despite this seemingly unbridgeable polarization, however, much of the *King of Tars* quietly occupies that impossible, abyssal middle space. In the princess's dream, one of the black hounds in ferocious pursuit becomes the white knight who will show her how to convert her foes. This figure enjoins the princess to something extraordinary, to lie and accept Islam. "To Mahoun ichil me take" (l. 487): the princess both renounces and retains her Christian faith. The usual script for these kinds of stories of steadfast Christian woman among the nonbelievers mandates that the patient and courageous heroine refuses to yield, thereby suffering martyrdom or otherwise triggering conversions. In Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale, for example, the sultan who falls in love with the emperor's daughter Custance happily converts his nation to marry her. Custance's voyage to Syria does not end well (the sultan's mother will murder her own son to retain her cherished identity as a Saracen), but she thereafter wanders the world as a quiet missionary, bringing her faith to all she meets. It is unthinkable that Custance would dissemble a religion not her own. The princess in *King of Tars*, however, "lerd þe heþen lawe" (l. 504). We are reassured that what she states with her mouth does not coincide with her heart, but her duplicity is noteworthy, not least because it must necessarily haunt the metamorphic baptism of her spouse. Nor are the king and the sultan quite as different as they make themselves out to be. The bloody actions which "þe soudan þat was blac" (l. 799) undertakes early in the text, so central to his racialized identity, are later performed by the king of Tars with the aid of the same sultan, now "al white bicom" (l. 929). The two men crusade together against "heþen houndes" (l. 1097). The murders, persecutions and imprisonments which characterized Saracen Damascus come to mark Christian Tars, a place where those who refuse conversion are decapitated, "hong & drawe," burnt, or incarcerated. Bloody religious strife on a massive scale opens and closes the story.

Perhaps this confusion is inevitable, given that Tars is at least two places at once. "Tars" could indicate the land of the Tartars, a non-Christian people who were imagined as fierce, even cannibalistic enemies of the civilized West. As likely proselytes themselves, how white and how Christian are this king and his daughter? "Tars" could also be Tarsus, the birthplace of St. Paul, Christianity's most famous

convert, propelled into a new identity on the road to Damascus. At the time this Middle English narrative was composed early in the fourteenth century, both Tartary and Tarsus were geographies under Mongol control.[5] *The King of Tars* is unnecessarily vague about its setting, suggesting in the end that Tars might be both Tarsus and Tartary at once: a turbulent expanse, not simply Christian or Muslim or white or black, but all these things in their dissonant heterogeneity. Tars becomes an intermedial expanse, the inhabited chasm that the text will not officially allow and yet quietly smuggles into being: a space of contradiction, experiment, violence, desire, hatred, body, soul, persecution, invention, becoming, transformation.

The location of race.

See A GLOBAL MIDDLE AGES; LANGUAGE; NATION; POSTCOLONIALISM.

## Notes

1 The discussion that follows is drawn in part from my entry on "Race" in the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*.

2 For more examples of dermal transformation as well as an extended analysis of the medieval linking of body to race, see Heng, "Invention of Race," parts I and II (esp. 285–87).

3 The best exploration of geohumoralism and medieval race in all its complexity is Akbari, *Idols in the East*.

4 For a detailed reading of the text's racial dynamics, see Heng, "Jews, Saracens, 'Black Men,' Tartars." I am grateful to Stephanie Norris for sharing her dissertation chapter on the romance with me, and have been inspired by her analysis of the unformed baby's central role.

5 See the introduction to Judith Perryman's edition of the text, where she suggests a third alternative, also Mongol-controlled: Tharsia, supposed place of origin for at least one of the Magi (47–48).

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