

On Saracen enjoyment: Some fantasies of race
in late medieval France and England.

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On Saracen Enjoyment:
Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England

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Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other. It is not simply--humanistically--a matter of being able to accept the other, but of being in his place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. . . . The word foreshadowed the exile, the possibility or necessity to be foreign and to live in a foreign country, thus heralding the art of living of a modern era, the cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed.

--Julia Kristeva, "Toccata and Fugue for the Foreigner"

Because she writes in universalizing terms, feminist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has been dismissed as an essentializing throwback to her Parisian predecessors, the existentialists led by Jean-Paul Sartre, with their Big Pronouncements on *la condition humaine*.¹ In *Strangers to Ourselves (Étrangers à Nous-Mêmes)*--the title of which even cites Albert Camus--Kristeva conducts a poetical investigation into the place of the other, arguing that a painful self-estrangement suffuses *all* human subjectivity.² Because in this formulation a foundational otherness is everywhere, the counterargument goes, it is nowhere. I must admit to never having understood the logic of this kind of dismissal, frequent in scholarly circles (e.g., "If queerness is everywhere, it is nowhere"): many things are omnipresent--oxygen, altruism, violence--and they do not vanish once confronted with that fact. But the anxiety which provokes such a dismissal of Kristeva's thesis is understandable, for *any* universalism would seem to exclude the determinative power of the local, the contingent, the historical, all of which are central to contemporary critical work on ethnicity and race.

In this essay I would like to place in conversation the grand gestures [End Page 113] of psychoanalysis and the temporally circumscribed discourses of medieval and postcolonial studies, especially as they relate to the construction of race in late medieval France and England. These three modes of analysis find a natural point of overlap in exploring the cultural work of the Saracens, whose dark skin and diabolical physiognomy were the Western Middle Ages' most familiar, most exorbitant embodiment of racial alterity.³ Most scholarship on Saracens has been content to explain their widespread presence by reference to their function in crusading propaganda, where their monstrous presence serves as both a call to arms and an uncomplicated antithesis to Christian identity. When a medieval text declares that in the Holy Land Saracens circumcise Christian boys and "spill the blood of circumcision right into the baptismal fonts and compel them to urinate over them," it is clear that these demonized others perform their blasphemous acts to mobilize the text's auditors against them.⁴ Such historicizing explanation works admirably well in demonstrating the contextual determination of race, linking the promulgation of a spectacularly embodied otherness to a contemporary program of martial displacement. More difficult, however, is accounting for why outside of empty nostalgia or mere convention Saracens continued to inhabit the fantasies of times and places no longer passionately invested in the destruction of Islam. My aim in this essay is therefore threefold: to trace briefly the genealogy of a racialized bodily otherness marked by skin color in its relation to physiology and character; to argue that medieval constructions of race included the knowledge that a "biological" truth of the body is produced (and sustained) through repetitive acts of representation, so that this truth could be deterritorialized, disrupted, at the moment of its embodiment; and to suggest that psychoanalysis *because of its universalizing tendencies* provides a useful means for breaking the power of universals, allowing the particularities of the other to become visible at last. In the end, I would like to consider what Kristeva could possibly mean by the resonant phrase which ends my epigraph: what, exactly, is the "cosmopolitanism of those who have been...

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