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Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-) Middle Ages

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In the last decade there has been a notable body of work on premodern racial and ethnic representation. In medieval studies, questions of race and racism, anti-Semitism, and premodern colonialisms have been explored in collections such as *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen; in the special issue on race of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, edited by Thomas Hahn; and in the

monograph *Empire of Magic*, by Geraldine Heng.¹ Through such studies we see not only how the concept of race has proved central to postcolonial inquiry but also how the investigation of the early history of such concepts as race, ethnicity, and nation opens new perspectives onto both the past and the present.

Western European Christian understandings of human difference in the Middle Ages must be viewed within broader frameworks of categorizing human groups, that is, within discourses that were, Robert Bartlett asserts, "no more straightforward than our own."² Medieval authors considered not only genealogy but also elements of "environmental [End Page 391] influence," ultimately placing the greatest importance on "the cultural and social component of ethnic identity" (45). For Bartlett, the idea of race in the medieval period would appear much closer to that of "ethnic group," a categorization that emphasizes linguistic, legal, political, and cultural affinities more than somatic features as markers of racial difference. There are crucial distinctions between this type of notion of race and those that animate, for example, the racist systems of apartheid or anti-Semitism under national-socialism. While Bartlett rightly notes such differences in his important study *The Making of Europe*, he nevertheless employs the term *race*, demonstrating its relation to the more "malleable" and, for the Middle Ages, more significant factors of religion, law, language, and custom. These combined elements figured in the creation of "Europe" as a construct, or the "Europeanization of Europe" in the Middle Ages.³ Some scholars resist the use of the term *race* in medieval contexts, but avoiding "semantic squabbles" by avoiding the term *race* "would make a history of racism going back to the Middle Ages impossible."⁴ In medieval studies, scholars have attempted to write this history, challenging traditional notions of periodization and engaging with political and theoretical debates that have relevance to the present day.

This essay similarly attempts to engage with this recent work, but by approaching the questions it raises from a somewhat different direction. My goal is to intervene in ongoing discussions of race and periodicity, particularly vis-à-vis medieval culture, in order to investigate the informing role of the medieval and more particularly of medievalisms in the construction, representation, and perpetuation of modern racisms. While some medievalists have explored questions of race and racism in medieval contexts, "neomedievalists," primarily journalists and international relations experts, have presented very different visions of the Middle Ages on the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, *Time*, and the *Atlantic*. Their approaches rely on a vision of medieval Europe that is [End Page 392] frozen within traditional notions of periodization and that is uniformly Christian and normatively white.

These representations of medieval Europe figure integrally into some influential contemporary portrayals of concepts like "the West" and "Western civilization." For instance, John Ganim asserts that

the idea of the Middle Ages as it developed from its earliest formulations in the historical self-consciousness of Western Europe is part of what we used to call an identity crisis, a deeply uncertain sense of what the West is and should be. The idea of the Middle Ages as a pure Europe (or England or France or Germany) both rests on and reacts to an uncomfortable sense of instability about origins, about what the West is and from where it came.⁵

Ganim's insight into the representation of medieval Europe as "pure" is extremely important. Alongside the stereotyped portrait of the Middle Ages as a backward, brutal period exists an idealized nostalgia inflected by notions of racial and religious purity. This...

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¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000); Thomas Hahn, ed., "Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages," special issue, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001); Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

² Robert Bartlett, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 42. On the different but related topic of the so-called monstrous races see the classic study by John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).



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