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H-France Review Vol. 21 (October 2021), No. 189

Victoria Turner, *Theorizing Medieval Race: Saracen Representations in Old French Literature*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2019. 228 pp. Illustrations, notes, index, and bibliography. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-781886-67-0; \$12.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-1-781886-68-7; \$0.00 (eb, Books@JSTOR). ISBN 978-1-781886-69-4.

Review by Laura K. Morreale, Independent Scholar.

In *Theorizing Medieval Race*, Victoria Turner contemplates the matter of medieval understandings of race, a topic that has deservedly attracted a great deal of scholarly attention of late. As the title suggests, the author both draws out and draws upon recent theoretical approaches to race and to gender as lenses through which to view a collection of Old French texts that date principally to the thirteenth century. The author's introductory chapter first situates her exploration within the ongoing discussion of race in the field of Medieval Studies. The study, she contends, does not aim to be activist, unlike other laudable efforts geared towards increasing representation of racial minorities in positions in higher education or responding to the misuse of the Middle Ages by politically motivated groups. Instead, her study "engages in the study of race and racism in the medieval period itself" (p. 11) in four themed chapters that examine, in turn, "Race and Gender," "Race and Time," "Race and Religion," and "Race and Community." Each section treats a separate Old French text or set of thematically linked works, allowing a deeper dive into the four attendant concepts.

Before turning to each sub-theme, however, the author's introduction sets the theoretical stage of the study and defines both the terms and concepts she will apply with each successive pairing. Turner states unequivocally that there is no clear definition or set of characteristics corresponding to the Old French word *Sarrasin* (rendered into modern English as "Saracen," a problematic term in and of itself). Rather, what we understand as a fundamentally race-bound term remains, in the author's words, "simultaneously familiar and unknowable: a fundamentally nebulous being that resists any attempt at a fixed definition" (p. 3). With such an unstable concept, which seems to mean something different with each successive example--at times relying upon opposing faith traditions, at other times on physiognomy, and still others on genealogy or geography--recourse to a robust critical approach is in order. The author therefore calls upon theories first put forth by Judith Butler, admittedly to explore gender rather than race, which argue that gender is constructed principally through "the conventionalizing power of repetition," a kind of performativity that in turn grants such concepts their significance (p. 14). It is, therefore, by adopting and adapting Butler's performativity model to questions of race, rather than gender, that Turner ultimately shapes her study. Medieval race as presented in Old French narrative is a fluid concept, she argues, so that readers must look to how the concept was

reiterated and received to assess both its impact and range of meanings. It is therefore by examining how questions of race are presented dynamically, in concert with gender, time, religion, and community, that we can glimpse its contours and grasp how the term was used in opposition to these related themes.

The first chapter, “Race and Gender,” uses the Nanteuil Cycle of *chansons de geste* to explore how the troubling of gender identification in these Old French texts can both bolster our understandings of racial fluidity, as well as accompany them. Although the meaning and impact of cross-dressing and disguise within this same corpus has been explored by previous scholars, Turner takes her analysis of the relatively common literary motif a step further to apply it to questions of race. She argues that when an author upsets the expectations that outward appearances of race might suggest, this in turn introduces greater incertitude about a particular character or characteristic for the audience. According to Butler, identities can challenge social conventions rather than simply reflect them. “Disguise ploys,” Turner argues, “allow us to see such processes at work, as they rest upon the perpetrator’s ability to exploit the expectations of those around him or her.” (p. 28). To create the connection between gendered disguises and what Turner calls “racial cross-dressing,” the author relies first upon the example of Ganor, a Saracen warrior who takes on the costume of a Christian pilgrim to win the love of Aye, a Christian noblewoman. Just as in Butler’s work, cross-dressing or drag can work to reveal a body’s “true” gender identity in lieu of what is outwardly perceived, so too does Ganor’s choice of a Christian disguise, with its racial connotations, reveal him as belonging rightfully to the Frankish community with its accompanying set of norms. In this case, the work upends the notion that external signs of race necessarily dictate internal states of being. The pairing of gender and race as open to such fluid identities is even more pronounced in the case of Blanchandine, a Saracen princess who takes on the disguise of a Christian knight to protect herself while she is imprisoned by her pagan father. Surprisingly, not only are Blanchandine’s racial characteristics effaced, her sexual organs are also supernaturally transformed so that she no longer presents as a woman or is able to fulfill her reproductive role. For Turner, this suggests that genealogy is a crucial component of how race is constructed in the Cycle, since Blanchandine’s crossing of both race and gender lines negates her ability to participate in the construction of familial lineage. Turner’s examination of gender and race in this chapter thus hinges on how the body is represented, so that “disguise challenges the norms of expected behavior, whether racial, gendered, or even class-based, acting as a leveler and allowing identity to be chosen by removing restrictions that we might assume to be imposed by physical form.” (p. 49).

The emphasis on genealogy and its embedded chronologies brings the author to a consideration of “Race and Time” in chapter two. Relying upon the *Estoire del Saint Graal* tradition, Turner demonstrates how tenuously genealogy and time are related, an important element when considering whether race must necessarily be viewed as an inherited trait. In what will surely be recognizable to any reader of the *Estoire* texts, Turner emphasizes how the many narrative strands are temporally confused and at times even conflicted, so that, when confronted with such *entrelacement*, a sequential understanding of parentage becomes nearly impossible. Within this narrative world, Galahad, whose identity and lineage is more closely associated with the quest for the grail than any reproductive realities, represents but one example of parentage as dissociated from familial chronology and therefore open to the possibility of racial indeterminacy. Within the *Estoire* tradition, race is associated far more with questions of faith than of heredity, since genealogies are largely constructed through a narrative repetition rather than any blood relationship. This point is further driven home by the tradition’s geographies, which are at once

highly specific, but also frustratingly muddled. Whereas cities or regions in the East might at once be precisely located, their significance for the characters who either claim or inhabit them neither confirms their origins nor their selfhood, offering instead an opposition to westward-looking Britain and an overture to the genealogical possibilities that association with the grail might ultimately ordain.

The attraction and power of Christian faith symbols is revisited in Turner's chapter three, entitled "Race and Religion." In what is perhaps the book's most compelling section, the author examines the early thirteenth-century *Miracles de Notre Dame*, a short work that traces the unintentional conversion to Christianity of the main character, who is identified as a Saracen. The conversion is accomplished not through any specific desire on the part of the protagonist, but rather as the result of his own practice of image worship. The depiction of the Virgin is so beautiful, the text argues, that he cares for it diligently and kneels before it at least once a day. With such devotion on display, the Virgin ultimately manifests in her full physicality, ensuring his conversion to Christianity. In this story, Turner argues, his behavior "outweighs any racial aspects of Saracen identity" which, in turn, challenges the very notion of what was required to be a Christian (p. 90). As neatly expressed as Turner's first reading may be, it is her examination of the visual program in the various manuscript copies of the work that make this chapter shine, particularly given the author's assertion of the instability of race as concept in the Old French repertoire. Her careful comparison of the text's conversion scene from several manuscript copies confirms how unconcerned the tale's illustrators were with attributing a fixed set of race-based physical characteristics to the main character. Even as the *Roman* asserts that physical appearance can be an indicator of one's religious health, there is no consistent depiction of the protagonist's original, stated race, nor how the physical realities of his old self might compare with his new Christian form.

The author's last chapter, "Race and Community," explores the medieval notion of the Saracen expressed collectively rather than individually. Turner's reading of the thirteenth-century *Roman de Mahomet* contends that the text's main objection to non-Christian society relies principally upon the Prophet's allegedly deceitful claims to divine communication, and his community's willingness to be duped into believing them. This critique, Turner argues, is cleverly associated with ongoing debates closer to home—as close as those among monastic and secular scholars based at the University of Paris—concerning the relationship between reason and faith. The fault of the members of Saracen society rests as much on their willingness to make Muhammad a prophet through their own credulity as on their lack of understanding that God alone could confer such status. Muhammad, Turner notes, is used as a "touchstone" to communicate the dangers of speech and reason when they have been divorced from faith (p. 156). If indeed Saracen society is to be understood as being racially marked in this text, it is one that is too easily convinced, too ignorant, and too willing to believe in their own power to perceive and authorize the holy.

Turner's book concludes with a glance towards future directions, to the application of her theoretical framings into the next generation of Old French writings. Most importantly, she briefly undertakes a consideration of how textual *mouvance* may also have played a role in racial shapings over time. This, I believe, is among the most promising avenues for Turner's work, since the processes she identifies as fundamental to understanding race in the Old French corpus—that is, performativity and repetition—are strikingly similar to those which characterize the repertoire as a whole. One of the primary reasons for the production and reproduction of

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vernacular writings in the thirteenth-century kingdom of France was so that they might be performed, and in their repetition and reception, were necessarily changed. Thus Turner's conviction that race itself was a malleable concept, even as her work seeks to delimit and define it, is in fact wholly part and parcel of the dynamic nature of the genre itself, with its written versions serving as but an echo of their staged realities. With a topic of such complexity, Turner's approach is both effective and warranted, and the resulting study deliberate, measured, and securely evidence-based.

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ISSN 1553-9172