“AS BLACK AS THEY WERE BEFORE”:
THE HISTORY OF SKIN COLOUR AND THE
HISTORY OF THE HOLY ROOD-TREE

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you would think it necessary for the Ethiopian actually to change his skin
before there can be any harmonious living or lucid thinking

—Anna Julia Cooper

THE ELEVENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH homily The History of the Holy Rood-Tree is perhaps the first surviving English text to describe white skin as more beautiful than black skin. It thus may be the first English text to present a hierarchy of skin colour. While previous medieval English texts had depicted black skin negatively, they had not connected this anti-Blackness to a valorization of whiteness, as the History does. Yet the History does not depict Black people as entirely negative but as devout believers with special insight into the will of the divine.

The History tells the story of the miraculous Rods of Moses, which transform into the tree that becomes the Cross that Jesus hangs upon. The History, one link in a long chain of narratives about the origins of the Cross, has a unique episode in which the Rods turn the men and children of two families of Ethiopians white, while the Ethiopian women of both families remain Black.² By contrast, in later versions of the legend like the Cursor Mundi, the miracle turns several black-skinned men white and there is no mention of their families. The History not only presents the Ethiopian women as an exception, but also depicts them interpreting their own enduring Blackness and citing theological explanations.

The History’s story is this: Moses finds three Rods growing from the ground, which he recognizes as symbolizing the Trinity. An angel sends King David to take ownership of the Rods. David performs a series of miracles with the Rods, all of them healing miracles, save for the transformation of the Ethiopians. The Ethio-

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2 Throughout this essay, I capitalize “Black” and “Blackness” when they refer to people. I thus follow conventions suggested by Black writers. Such capitalization acknowledges that Black has the same dignity as, say, Irish, and it also draws attention to the socially constructed nature of the category. As Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, “Giving black a big B could signal that it’s not a generic term for some feature of humanity but a name for a particular human-made entity” (“The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black,” The Atlantic, June 18, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/).
pians encounter David on the road and ask to worship the Rods, whose power they immediately recognize. David refuses but a mysterious force extends his arm, with Rods in hand, towards the Ethiopians, who pray to the Rods and turn white. Amazed, they ask David to return to their families, who are amazed at the transformed Ethiopian men. The men’s wives and sons kneel and pray, but only the sons become white. The wives somewhat cryptically interpret this event as reflecting who obeyed the Lord’s commandments in the past. The Ethiopians are portrayed as seemingly already proto-Christians, familiar with God’s commandments, even though the entire story takes place before the birth of Jesus. Only a few, fairly negative figures in the text are ever called “Jewish.”

In the aftermath of the transformation of the Ethiopian sons, the History states that the sons’ new whiteness makes them “swa faegeres hiwæs” (as beautiful of hue) as their fathers, making the History one of the earliest surviving English texts to represent white skin as beautiful in contrast to black skin. Blackness unlocks access to divine knowledge but also appears less beautiful than whiteness. Blackness in the History is unbeautiful, abject, and humble, yet it grants closeness to divine insight.

This episode within the History shows how the European Middle Ages laid the groundwork for later Euro-American racism and colonialism. Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell argues that modern European racism and colonialism have medieval roots: “[E]ven in the very early days of the first English slave plantations in the Caribbean, no Englishman arrived without a readymade set of assumptions about the blacks and the landscape he would encounter.” Campbell’s insight—that we must historicize the precolonial structures that gave birth to colonial and postcolonial racisms—invites collaboration between postcolonial studies and medieval studies. Matthieu Chapman suggests that anti-Blackness predates the slave trade: “slave-traders did not create the rupture between blackness and humanity on the slave ship; rather, they brought it with them from England.” Cord Whitaker similarly argues that “the profound anxiety about black characters found in English literature has its roots in the Middle Ages.” Yet scholars have understudied such anxiety in the earliest surviving English literature.


To analyze the History of the Holy Rood-Tree, I turn to intersectional theory and to Frantz Fanon’s theories of psychoanalysis, race, and history. Fanon calls for *longue durée* histories of racism, a radical model that medieval studies has resisted as anachronistic and ideological. By seeing the History in the context of centuries of European anti-Blackness, however, we can historicize modern white racial fantasies of Black inferiority. The History is part of what Fanon calls a “historical-racial schema,” one drop in an ocean of European stories about Black people that have permeated Euro-American culture for centuries.

As one of the earliest surviving Holy Rood narratives to depict whitening of Black figures, and as one of the more popular medieval narratives, the History serves an important role in producing narratives of Black inferiority. The History itself was likely much more well known in England than other related texts, as it was a homily read to a congregation. Brandon Hawk argues that the History was part of a liturgical sequence, likely read on September 14 for the Exaltation of the Cross. Given three surviving manuscripts and evidence of its influence at least as far as Wales, the History may have been heard from many pulpits on many Septembers.

We cannot know the extent of the History’s influence on racial thinking in England, though the long tradition of Rood-Tree stories featuring whitened Ethiopians suggests that some version of those stories circulated throughout England for centuries. This long tradition lends weight to the Afro-Pessimist argument that anti-Blackness is fundamental to western discourse, since it shows how long anti-Blackness has infected English thought. English literature did not require the Crusades or the Middle Passage to begin thinking in racial terms. Perhaps the inverse is true, and such racial fantasies paved the way for the Crusades and the Middle Passage.

**Fanon and the History**

Early medieval scholars have long resisted discussing race. Yet, scholarship on early English treatment of the Irish, Welsh, and Britons has used terms like “race”...
and “racism” for decades without major pushback. For instance, Stephen Harris’s monograph on early medieval English race and ethnicity focuses on English attitudes towards Norse, British, and Irish peoples, with little reference to other groups and no citation of the deep body of scholarship, including critical race theory, that addresses race, racism, and racial thinking. Even though scholarship on early medieval English racism towards Irish and Welsh people exists, some scholars have blocked discussions of English racial attitudes towards people they do not consider part of Europe, particularly melanin-rich peoples.

In the last few years, however, a group of medievalists considering race in early medieval England has emerged. They approach the topic from several different angles: race and contemporary medievalisms, racism in early medieval English studies, and historical racial categories and racial thinking in the early medieval


period itself. Much of this scholarship, as the citations here illustrate, is published outside of traditional academic venues—a sobering reminder of the profession’s ongoing gatekeeping of race studies—and scholarly engagement with Fanon’s work remains sparse, despite several medievalists who study early medieval England beginning to take up Fanon’s work in a substantive way.

Despite Fanon’s canonical status as an early theorist of race, he remains largely absent in medievalist studies of race and skin colour. Few major studies of medieval race mention Fanon, despite Fanon’s impact on psychoanalytic, biopolitical, and sociocultural veins of race studies. While Fanon’s views on homosexuality, Jewish people, and women are, at times, troubling, Keguro Macharia has noted the eagerness with which scholars dismiss Fanon as problematic in order to embrace white theorists. Critical race theorists like Stuart Hall, Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye, and Sylvia Wynters all cite Fanon as a towering influence, as do early modernists working on race.
Despite Fanon’s profound legacy, medieval scholars have not only been largely silent on Fanon—some scholars of early medieval England have even represented Fanon as a threat to medieval studies. Allen Frantzen stated that the proposed replacement of John Locke in a Stanford syllabus with Frantz Fanon was a bad omen for medievalists:

[Revisionist academics’] views of the Western tradition are not encouraging for Anglo-Saxonists. At Stanford University, we can contemplate the fate of John Locke, whose writings form an essential strand in the social theory of language. A Stanford dean has written that Locke’s views on social justice “seemed indispensable” half a century ago, but that the “interdependent world order” of our own decade suggests that “someone like Frantz Fanon, a black Algerian psychoanalyst, will get us closer to the answer we need.” In this formulation, Fanon, a radical extremist as well as a psychoanalyst (although this is not mentioned by the dean), replaces Locke.21

Frantzen’s anti-feminist views are, I hope, well-known.22 Here he ventures beyond misogyny to argue that Fanon’s inclusion by “revisionists” (who Frantzen calls “Professors of Otherness”) represents an attack on medieval studies, suggesting that Fanon’s work threatens a conservative idea of the Middle Ages.23 Building on Frantzen’s comments, Fred Robinson implies that Fanon represented a threat to western tradition:

The Stanford dean whom [Frantzen] quotes...shows little interest in probing the western European tradition which has made us what we are. People of the dean’s persuasion seem to feel that Beowulf, Bede, Alfred (and Plato and Shakespeare and Locke) have had the floor for far too long and should be replaced with revolutionary voices emanating from nonwestern cultures.24


23 Frantzen, Desire for Origins, 216.

Robinson thinks Fanon’s study of western racism, anti-Blackness, and colonialism has nothing to offer those shaped by a western European tradition. Frantzen and Robinson’s characterizations of Fanon as a non-western “radical extremist” and a “revolutionary voice” threatening the western European tradition—and thus medieval studies—suggests many medievalists studying early medieval England have seen themselves as part of a western European tradition that they must defend against non-western voices.

Fanon, however, is a deeply important thinker for medieval studies, one of the first theorists to consider how racial inferiority complexes came from the weight of centuries of racism. In his classic 1952 text Peau noire, masques blancs (published in English as Black Skin, White Masks), he traced how white society colonizes the psyche of the Black subject. The book also echoed medieval texts. In it, Fanon described his project like some medieval European authors described their books: “My book is, I hope, a mirror with a progressive infrastructure where the black man can find the path to disalienation.”²⁵ Fanon envisioned his book as a mirror for the Black man to undo the psychic alienation brought about by the density of history, that is, by the density of European ideas of Black inferiority. My book is, I hope, a mirror. Many medieval authors also described their books as mirrors. One of the most important medieval genres—speculum or mirror literature—described books as mirrors, encouraging self-reflection and self-improvement.²⁶ Fanon, knowingly or not, reproduced this medieval genre with a twist in his own account of the Middle Ages’ racial legacies.

In Black Skin, Fanon represents the colonized Black psyche as one that desires to exchange black skin for white: “Out of the blackest part of my soul, through the zone of hachures, surges up this desire to be suddenly white. I want to be recognized not as Black but as White.”²⁷ This colonizing of the Black psyche, for Fanon, is a “historical-racial schema.” This schema is created, he states, “by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.”²⁸ The schema is the weight of western stories about Black people. In other words, Fanon argues that centuries of anti-Blackness cause modern Black people to feel inferior and to desire whiteness.

The idea that Black people want to become white also appeared in western European medieval texts that depict black skin turning white. The History of the Holy Rood-Tree is the earliest extant English text in a tradition of stories about the Rods of Moses that depict black-skinned people turning white.²⁹ Arthur Napier

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²⁵ Fanon, Black Skin, 161.
²⁷ Fanon, Black Skin, 45.
²⁸ Fanon, Black Skin, 91.
²⁹ Napier, ed., History of the Holy Rood-Tree, xxxv, argues that the History is part of two basic story groups: one about a Latin legend of the Cross, and one about a Rood-Tree. The Rood-Tree Group consists of the Cambridge and Harleian Latin prose versions, the Andrius fragments, Dboec van...
suggested that the *History* derived from a now-lost Latin version, thought to be a direct ancestor of the Middle English *Cursor Mundi*, in which the Rods of Moses turn black-skinned Muslims white.\(^{30}\) Other texts echo this imagery. For instance, in the Middle English romance *The King of Tars*, the Muslim Sultan of Damascus changes from Black to white as part of his conversion to Christianity.\(^{31}\) Cord Whitaker notes that the Sultan converts after the miracle of his pigment change, which makes him believe in Jesus’s power.\(^{32}\) Similarly, Jacqueline de Weever argues that medieval French texts depicted Muslim princesses who would later convert to Christianity as white-skinned, so that no Black Christians ever appeared.\(^{33}\) Crucially, while such examples linked whiteness to Christianity, whiteness rarely directly signified being Christian, since Muslims whitened before conversion.\(^{34}\)

*The History of the Holy Rood-Tree* depicts Black people as devout proto-Christians whose whitening has nothing to do with a conversion. Moreover, despite the *History* being the earliest surviving English version of such a story of transformed skin colour, most scholars have ignored the *History*. An English homily preserved in the twelfth-century Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 343, the *History* has been dated to the first half of the eleventh century by Napier, who argues that a West Saxon author translated it.\(^{35}\) Eleventh-century fragments of the *History* from other manuscripts, discovered after Napier’s edition, confirm his intuitions,\(^{36}\) even as they


\(^{31}\) Moma, “The Theater of Race,” 428n71, also makes the connection between the *History* and *King of Tars*.


suggest the History’s popularity. The History is also, as Thomas Hill notes, perhaps the longest prose narrative in Old English. The twelfth-century Welsh Master John of St. Davids likely knew it, suggesting it travelled widely in the British Isles. These facts should be important to our picture of early England, yet scholars have ignored the History, perhaps because its hierarchy of skin colour unsettles narratives about early England. Only two scholars, to my knowledge, have examined its depictions of race: Jasmine Kilburn-Small and Haruko Momma.

Anti-Blackness has distorted scholarship on the History, contributing to its obscurity and to its misinterpretation. Napier’s edition of the History claims that the Rods healed the Ethiopians’ “blackness and hideousness,” but the History itself never says they are hideous. Napier himself assumes Blackness means hideousness. Likewise, he translates the Ethiopian women’s requests for transformation as a request for a “boon,” stating that the women “would fain ask for the same [boon],” but the Old English text says only that the women “woldan ðæs ylcæ wilniæn” (wished that same desire) (18.21). Napier presupposes that whiteness was a boon to the Black women, something that the Old English text does not say.

These anti-Black assumptions have prevented scholars from seeing the true complexity of skin colour in the History, which assigns layered meanings to both Blackness and whiteness. Kilburn-Small claims that the imagery “seems to suggest that only white skin symbolizes Christianity.” However, the Ethiopians’ transformation seems to be an affirmation of their pre-existing faith, and their Blackness grants them spiritual insight denied to anyone else in the narrative, insight that they lose when they become whitened. Blackness in the History thus functions as what Whitaker calls “black metaphors,” which he characterizes as having a rhetorical “shimmer” in which Blackness oscillates between different meanings. Whitaker describes black metaphors as “textual moments in which black skin signifies sameness and otherness, spiritual purity and sinfulness, salvation and damnation” all at once.

The History stands at the border of a shift in ideas about skin colour in medieval western Europe, as Europeans who we would now call “white” rarely described themselves as “white” prior to this period. Scholars of colour have pointed out this medieval shift in attention to skin colour for a century, yet only recently have medievalists taken note of it. W. E. B. Du Bois stated in the 1920s that “[t]he Middle Age...
regarded skin colour with mild curiosity" and argued that Europeans only began to
describe themselves as white recently. In recent years, medievalists have begun
to recognize that the ideology of skin colour has a history, arguing that whiteness
emerged midway through the Middle Ages. Jacqueline De Weever, one of the first
medievalists to write about race, argued in 1998 that whiteness appeared as the
ideal of feminine beauty from at least 1150 onward, and negative medieval depic-
tions of black-skinned people can be found well prior to the rise of whiteness. Sub-
sequent medievalists examined the role of skin colour and race in the European
Middle Ages. Geraldine Heng argues that skin colour was not the primary marker
of race in the Middle Ages. Heng and Madeline Caviness argue that, prior to 1250,
Europeans rarely identified themselves as “white.” I suggest that these precolo-
nial narratives of anti-Blackness became, centuries later, part of the historical-racial
schema that Fanon describes. The History marks one of the first moments when an
English text proposed a hierarchy of skin colour.

**Ethiopian Insight, White Ignorance**

The History hints that Fanon’s idea of the Self-Other binary has a pre-history in
medieval Europe. Fanon argues that, as an effect of colonialism, the Black subject
finds themselves split between their self-image and their image of themselves as
the Other of the white man. Fanon argues that the internally split Black subject
desires to be like the white master but is denied recognition by the master: "For
Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master scorns the consciousness of the slave.”
The white subject in the colonial relationship “wants from the slave...not recogni-
tion but work.” Fixed by the white gaze, Fanon found himself “an object among
other objects,” a statement whose early modern history Kim Hall has unpacked.
Fanon’s white subject engages in a fantasy of completeness and independence
from an Other, while the colonized Black subject’s entire sense of self is mediated
through their relationship to the white subject.

44 De Weever, *Sheba’s Daughters*.
47 On Fanon’s concept of the Other, see Fuss, “Interior Colonies,” and Hall, “Why Fanon?”
48 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 89 and 190–97, here 195n10.
49 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 195n10.
51 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 195n10.
The *History* describes Moses’s discovery of three holy Rods, which he reluctantly passes to King David. After accomplishing several miracles with the Rods, David plants them and they grow into one tree, a symbol of the Trinity. That tree becomes the cross that Jesus hangs upon. Prior to becoming a tree, the Rods perform a number of miracles, mostly in the hands of David. White and Black characters come into contact with the Rods, but while white characters have to interpret the meaning of the Rods, Black characters know it right away. The narrative represents God’s will as unconscious: (white) characters find themselves acting or speaking without knowing why and must interpret their own actions to figure out what God wants them to do. Only Black characters understand their desires and actions.

At the beginning of the *History*, David knows that God wants him to want something, but he does not know what it is. After Moses finds the three Rods, an angel sends David to Moses to ask a boon, but he does not tell David what to ask for. David tells God, “ðe me sendest bodian to ierusalem þurh þinne halgan engel hwæt ðeo wilnunge beon scolde þe ic ðæt moyse wilniæn sceolde” (you sent me to Jerusalem to make known to me through your holy angel what the desire was that I should desire from Moses) (12.25–27). David must figure out *what he is meant to want* from Moses. God’s will functions as a kind of unconscious impulse that David must interpret, a frequent trope of the *History*.

On the road to Jerusalem, David meets two Ethiopians, who immediately recognize the power of the Rods:

> Sonæ swa heo him to neahlæhton. 7 heo on ða gyrdon bisegen ða cylpoden heo 7 ðus cwædon Mucele beoð þa máegenu ðe ðu mid þe ferest On godes nome wit halsigæð þe . þæt ðu unc unne þæt wit heom gretan moten 7 unc ðerto bidden. (16.17–20)

(As soon as they drew near him and they saw the Rods, they cried out and spoke thus: “Mighty are the powers that you bear with you. In God’s name, we entreat you to allow us to greet them and pray thereto.”)

Neither Moses nor David recognizes the importance of the Rods at first. Yet the Ethiopians perceive the Rods’ power at once. Following Fanon, we can see the importance of Black recognition of (white) Christian power here. The Ethiopians serve as the most significant witnesses to Christian power in the text. Despite their recognition of the Rods’ power, David believes that it would be improper to allow the Ethiopians to touch the Rods. He tells the Ethiopians, “Me ne dafenæð na inc þæt to þæfienne . ac giif ðe mildheorte god inc ðæs guunæn wullæ . 7 git þæs wurðe bén gewurðe his willæ” (It is not fitting to me that I allow you both that [request], but if the mild-hearted God will permit it and you are worthy of it, let his will be done) (16.21–23). David suggests that God *might* permit the Ethiopians’ request but implies that this would be because God is “mildheorte” (mild-hearted), not because the Ethiopians are worthy. At no other time in the nar-

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52 The Ethiopians think that the power rests in the Rods, rather than in God. Only a few lines prior, an angel rebukes David for attributing God’s power to the Rods. The Ethiopians thus are presented as imperfect readers.
rative does David express reluctance to use the Rods. It is only when he sees the two Ethiopians that he questions whether God’s grace extends to them. He fails to recognize these Ethiopians as subjects, a failure that Fanon documents as essential to the modern Black experience.

Unlike in later versions of this story, such as in the Cursor Mundi, David is an unwilling conduit for divine transformation. As soon as David expresses doubt, a powerful invisible force “apened” (drew) his arm bearing the Rods towards the Ethiopians (16.24). David struggles against this force but cannot overcome it: “he nateshwn hine him to geteon ne mihte” (he could by no means draw [his arm back] to himself) (16.24–25). The Ethiopians pray to the Rods, kneeling, and when they stand, their Blackness is turned to whiteness: “Ða þe heo up arisene wæron þa wearð all heoræ swartnysse on hwitnesse iwænd” (When they had arisen up again, then all their blackness was changed into whiteness) (16.26–27). God works through David, seeing worth that David does not.

David changes his demeanor once the Ethiopians become white. The Ethiopians ask David to come to their home and stay with them for a while. David agrees, his former reluctance reversed: “Ne dafeneð me ná þæt ic inc ðæs wérne ; ðe git to me gyrmæð” (it is not fitting to me that I deny you that desire which you ask of me) (18.1–2). David repeats his previous statement, but he inverts its meaning: before it had been “ne dafeneð” (not fitting) to grant these men’s wishes, but now it is “Ne dafeneð” (not fitting) for him to deny their wishes. David’s treatment of the Ethiopians changes with their skin colour: their new whiteness changes what he sees as appropriate to grant them.

Here we first encounter the History’s complex treatment of Blackness: while the transformation marks Blackness as inferior to whiteness in David’s eyes, Blackness also enables access to divine knowledge that white characters seem not to possess. God is willing to grant the Ethiopians’ request, but David thinks it “not fitting.” The Ethiopians worship the Rods and are transformed, seemingly as a reward for their faith. The anti-Blackness of the Ethiopians’ transformation to whiteness is positioned uneasily beside the suggestion that the Ethiopians have access to knowledge and spirituality that other characters do not have. Moreover, the Ethiopians lose their insight with their Blackness. They are confused and no longer recognize each other: “ðæt heoræ nan oðer icnawæn ne cuðe” (they did not know each other) (16.31–2). The text presents the assumption of whiteness as both a reward and a loss, an elevation (at least in David’s eyes) that also takes the Ethiopians further from God.

The transformation of the Ethiopians marks a moment of “wonder” in the History that connects alliteratively with whiteness and change (wundrae, wundriende, hwitnesse, wæron, wearð, wæs, iwænd), connections that the History sustains

53 Another invisible force in Old English literature also occurs in the context of a Black figure, in the Old English translation of the Life of Saint Mary of Egypt, where an invisible force bars Mary from entering a church until she repents.

54 I am grateful to Mary Rambaran-Olm for this point.
hisTory of skin colour and The HistoR y of tHe HoLy Rood-tRee throughout. The gathered crowd at once cries out at the wonders shown them through the transformation, while the Ethiopians wonder at the change:

When they [the Ethiopians] had arisen up again, then was all their blackness changed into whiteness. Then spoke all the multitude who were with them and spoke thusly: “Oh lord, mighty are the wonders and the miracles that you have shown to men through these Rods.” And they [the Ethiopians] were wondering between themselves that it had happened thus to them so that they did not know each other.)

In these lines, *wundrae* and *wundriende* alliterate aurally with *hwitnesse* and with words that designate becoming and being: *wæron, weard, wæs, iwænd*. Whiteness and transformation are wonders (*wundrae*), and they produce wonder in those who see them (they “wundriende”). Racial transformation is a wonder of the highest order. Haruko Momma compares miracles worked by the Rods in the *History* and the Rood Tree in the Old English *Elene*, and she argues that “[t]he loss of blackness in the male members of the Ethiopian families, then, was apparently regarded as miraculous an event as the resurrection of a dead man.” The miracle of racial transformation underscores the assumed fixity of race at the same time that God’s power overcomes that fixity. The theme of wonder culminates at the end of the *History*, when an angel instructs St. Helen to fashion the nails from the Rood into a bridle for her son Constantine, a bridle that emits jets of flame:

Like the Ethiopians, Helen arises (“aris”) and then works wonders. This wonder causes everyone who sees Constantine to convert and ensures Constantine’s imperial power, since none thereafter can withstand him or Christianity. The same wonder that accompanied the Ethiopians’ transformation serves conversion and colonialism through a demonstration of the power of God and his followers.

Momma, “Theater of Race,” 421.
family is the educating and training ground for entry into society.” Whiteness allows the Ethiopians access to a white social world.

Yet in becoming part of the white family, the men become unrecognizable to their own. When the men return home, their wives “wundrian” (wonder) who the people coming to their home are: “Dáswardon dā wif heom 7 cwæðon ðæt heo heora stæfn ongitan sceoldon ac heo heoræ anseone náteshwón icnawæn ne cuðan” (Then the wives answered them and said that they should know their voices but that they could not at all recognize their faces) (18.5, 18.9–11). Skin colour in the History is a matter of recognition. When the wives ask what “wundræ” (wonders) changed their husbands, David shows them the Rods (18.19). Whiteness is a wonder, but it also introduces a gulf between family members and makes them unrecognizable to each other.

Theological Traditions about Blackness

The History derives from two disparate traditions: the tradition of blackness-as-sin and the tradition of blackness-as-humility that draws one closer to God. The History’s depiction of Ethiopian spiritual wisdom may also reflect long-standing classical Greek and Roman associations of Ethiopians with wisdom and peace. Indeed, an early medieval text lists attributes of racial groups and describes Ethiopians’ salient characteristic as peace: “Pax Aethioporum” (the Ethiopians’ peace). Mary Rambaran-Olm argues that the History’s depiction of Ethiopians may be connected to the writing of second-century theologian Dionysius the Areopagite. Dionysius’s most famous work, The Mystical Theology, argued that God was to be found in a light so bright it appeared as darkness to mortal eyes. Dionysius encouraged a contemplation of God that involved a mystical relationship between darkness and knowledge. The seventh-century Anglo-Latin works of Abbot Hadrian and Archbishop Theodore reference Dionysius the Areopagite; his work thus may have been known in early England.

One early medieval English tradition suggested darkness was humble. Bede argues that the Church is black because she is enduring trials, not because of any sin: “surely it is obvious that the church also is said to be black not on account of

56 Fanon, Black Skin, 127.
58 Weed, Ethnicity in Medieval Europe, 259. Translation mine.
59 Mary Rambaran-Olm, e-mail message to author, February 21, 2022.
sins or the defects of sinners, but on account of her own trials and sufferings, with which she is continuously vexed.” Bede sees blackness as a metaphor for the afflictions of the world. Blackness often symbolized Christian penance too. In Ælfric’s *Life of Chrysanthus and Daria*, a father imprisons and starves his son to compel him to renounce Christianity, only to be told that “Das geswencedenysa . and þas sweartan þeostra / þe þu him dest to wite . awenda þa cristenan / him sylfum to wuldra . na to witnunge” (these oppressions and these black darknesses / which you give to him as punishment, these Christians turn them / to their own glory and not to punishment). The Christian community adopted black for humility, just as they might wear ashes or sackcloth. In the Old English version of the *Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang*, blackness represents penance:

> se glæwa cyrcan lareow ne geypð he þa deopan geryno þæs gastlican andgytes þam þe he læð, ær he geso þæt hi be his blysunge an soðre andtyrnysse, an an soðre dædbote sweorcon and sweartion, and alecon þone scinendan woroldgyrlan and ymbscrydan hig mid þam woplican gyrlan for heora sinna gemynede.

(The wise ecclesiastical teacher does not disclose the mysteries of spiritual knowledge to those he teaches before he sees that they—by his example in truthful confession, and a truthful penance—become dark and become black and lay aside their shining worldly clothes and envelope themselves with tearful clothes as a reminder of their sins.)

The *Rule* tells bishops to teach their canons to turn towards blackness, which signifies mourning for their sins and penance. The *History* channels such traditions of blackness as penitential humbleness. But this is not the only tradition about blackness that the *History* reflects.

The *History* borrows imagery of blackness-turned-whiteness as a marker of spiritual cleanliness. Early medieval texts often used the image of the Ethiopian-turned-white to describe sinful souls being washed clean of their sins. One English text that appears alongside the *History* in MS Bodley 343 depicts salvation itself as a whitening: *Homily VI* states that baptism will make all Christians white in the Last Judgment: “Soplice þa gædering bið hwit iworden þurh fulluhtes bæðe” (Truly the gathering has become white through the baptismal bath). The eleventh-century English monk Goscelin of St. Bertin linked this blackness to Ethiopians and prayed to God to “Protect

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me...from the face of the Ethiopian sun blackening souls.” An Irish anecdote in the Saltair of Edmund Mac Richard describes a holy man whose prayers whiten a black soul in Hell. Another Old Irish anecdote concerns a king’s black soul in Hell that becomes “half-speckled” through a bishop’s prayers. This second anecdote can be found in the company of a version of the Rood-Tree story in the Leabhar Breac. Coincidences like this hint that such narratives circulated alongside each other, and that literature in the British Isles often described the change of Blackness to whiteness as a sign of God’s grace. Yet such depictions did not associate whiteness with Christianity, as they implied blackness was a characteristic of all sinful Christian souls.

Old English literature and art also associated devils with black skin and called them Ethiopians. In the Life of Saint Margaret, the titular saint confronts a devil “sweart and unfæger, swa him gecynde wæs” (black and unbeautiful, as was natural for them). Christian writing depicted devils as black “Ethiopians.” Goscelin of St. Bertin portrays St. Perpetua confronting various devils in different shapes, including one shaped like a dragon and another described as an “Ethiopian who would wrestle against her.” Black devils even made their way into English legal writing: one charter lays out consequences for anyone who is “inflamed against our decree by the appearance of a black demon.”

Some evidence hints that narratives about the Holy Cross like the History influenced Irish authors. See Darling, “The Cross Legends.”


Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, eds., The Old English Lives of Saint Margaret (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 162.


Charter S 508; quoted in Petra Hoffman, “Infernal Imagery in Anglo-Saxon Charters” (PhD
Such conflations of blackness and sin burrowed their way into early medieval English manuscript art. The late tenth-century Bodleian Library MS Junius 11 features two depictions of the Fall of the Angels that shows the rebel angels becoming black due to their sin and the damage of their fall.77 This manuscript is unique in pre-Conquest England as a “poetic manuscript to have had a planned cycle of illustrations for its verse.”78 The first depiction (Figure 1) is a full-page illustration that invites the gaze to travel from Lucifer in heavenly glory at the top to the blackened Lucifer in the hellmouth at the bottom, surrounded by meteoric angels. Just above hell, God hurtes spears at the falling angels.79 Carl Keers notes that the artist moves from a mixture of red and brown inks at the top of the image to primarily dark brown at the bottom, “as if to emphasize the fall from light to darkness.”80 Catherine Karkov suggests that the Junius manuscript’s only “consistent use of colour symbolism” appears in this image of the Fall.81 In the section just above the hellmouth, as Karkov notes, only God and the angel beside him are in red ink, while everyone else has been rendered in brown ink.82 Lucifer changes from being rendered in reds at the top of the image to dark browns at the bottom, his hair and skin darkened once he reaches the hellmouth. Asa Mittman and Susan Kim observe, further, that Lucifer’s appearance resembles contemporaneous depictions of Ethiopians: “His skin is now darkened and streaked, burned like that of the Ethiopians in the roughly contemporary Tiberius B.v Wonders of the East...He has been stained with his sin, marked by his transgression.”83 Heat and fire appear to have caused Lucifer’s black-
ness, as they caused most dark skin in medieval European literature: black bodies presented as damaged, burnt bodies. Just above the hellmouth, the toppling Lucifer is clothed and winged, with lighter hair and skin. In the fiery hellmouth, the fallen Lucifer (Figure 2) has lost his clothes and wings. His hair and skin are now darkened. The illustration shows Lucifer becoming blackened as a result of his fall and disobedience, suggesting a strong association of black skin with sin.

The second Junius 11 depiction (Figure 3) also emphasizes that sin causes black skin. In the top of the second image, the loyal angels all have light hair and features. Below them, angels fall into a giant hellmouth, their hair solid black. Several angels—in the lower left and bottom of the image—appear as inky silhouettes of total blackness. Such anti-Blackness has lurked in English literature practically from the first time an English monk set quill to sheepskin. Yet the History draws on two traditions of Blackness, one that saw it as representative of sin and another that saw it as humble and close to God.

Those two traditions come together in the History’s depiction of black skin as a form of disability, which allows the text to suggest black skin is both sinful and provides a kind of holy humility. Many of the miracles that the History ascribes to the Rods involve bodily healing, implying that the text depicts the Ethiopians’ transfor-

84 On colour in this manuscript, see Lockett, “An Integrated Re-Examination,” 156–57.
information as a cure of their black, sinful skin. Three miraculous healing episodes frame the Ethiopian episode. First, David uses the Rods to restore the burned hands of Moses’ servant. Then, on the road to Jerusalem, David attends Roxilus, who is “mid þam swelle iwæced. dæt he nan þing iseon ne mihte ac him þe licame al toblawen wǽs” (with the swelling afflicted so that he could see nothing but that his body was all blown up) (14.19–20). David has Roxilus drink water touched by the Rods, at which point Roxilus’s “untrumnesse all aweig awat” (unsoundness all went away) (16.1). After the Ethiopians transform, David encounters a man with leprosy in a cave. Once again, an invisible force pulls David’s arm, holding the Rods, towards the cave. The Rods spurt a jet of flame that rushes over the sick man’s body and consumes his leprosy, leaving him cured: “beforæn heom alle þe reoflæ forborn þe he on his lichame hæfde. 7 he aras swa hal 7 swa isúnd swylce he næfre nane untrumnesse næfde” (before them all the leprosy which he had on his body was all burned up and he arose as hale and as sound as though he never had any unsoundness) (20.13–5). Like the Ethiopians, the sick man arises (“aras”), and he is “alle” (all/wolly) transformed. Like Roxilus, he is cured of “untrumnesse” (unsoundness). God acts through David in all three incidents. David’s arm is “aþened” (drawn) by an invisible force to act on both the Ethiopians and the person with leprosy (20.8).

The man with leprosy and the Ethiopians are the only people who can see the Rods for what they are. The man with leprosy prophesizes that the Rods will come and heal him, then interprets them as the Trinity. Both the man with leprosy and the Ethiopians appear closer to divine truth than others. Both have their skin transformed. Both, the text suggests, are healed. Through this juxtaposition, Ethiopian Blackness is depicted as another illness visible on the body, like leprosy, Roxilus’ swelling, or the servant’s burned hands. Blackness is set among a series of unwellnesses and injuries, marking only the whitened body as a sound, healthy one. Blackness is depicted as another illness visible on the body, like leprosy, Roxilus’ swelling, or the servant’s burned hands. Blackness is set among a series of unwellnesses and injuries, marking only the whitened body as a sound, healthy one.
ness and leprosy also humble one, bringing one closer to God. Disability scholars note that medieval writers treat illnesses like leprosy in two distinct ways that parallel the two traditions of discussing black skin: leprosy was sometimes considered a punishment for sin, but it was also considered a marker of holy humility. The *History* makes ample use of this oscillation between sin and humility in its depictions of disability and Blackness.

The *History* insinuates that the Ethiopians—whose Blackness turns white—are cured from burns inflicted by the African sun. The narrative implies that the Ethiopians’ whitening is not only a spiritual cleansing but a kind of physical healing, but perhaps one merited by their devoutness. Most medieval European writers thought the heat of the sun caused Black skin. The Old English *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt*, for instance, describes Mary this way: “Swiðe sweartes lichaman heo wæs for þære sunnan hæto” (She was very black of body because of the sun’s heat). Isidore of Seville stated that Ethiopians were named after their colour and burned nature: “Ethiopia is so called after the colour of its inhabitants, who are scorched by the proximity of the sun.” The Old English word for Ethiopians, *sigelharwon*, likely means “sun-burned.” Classical theories of environmental determination also claimed that the burning rays of the African sun cause Blackness, as did texts like the Song of Songs, in which the Bride states that the sun has “decoloravit” (discoloured) her. Likewise, *The Wonders of the East* ends with a description of “swearte menn” (Black people) living on a mountain that is “eall byrnendre” (entirely burning). Black skin in the *History* was likely understood in this context. The *History*’s parallels between Blackness, leprosy, severe burns, and bodies bloated by illness imply that Black bodies are damaged.

The *History* is not unique in connecting Blackness to disability. In the *King of Tars*, a Black Muslim sultan and a white Mongol Christian princess have a disabled...
child, a “rond of flesche” (round of flesh) without features or apparent life.\textsuperscript{91} The Sultan converts to Christianity after God turns the Sultan’s skin white and changes the child to an able-bodied form, which is, as Molly Lewis notes, “a typical ‘healing’ narrative of disability.”\textsuperscript{92} Lewis notes that the child’s own “corporality” is part of how race and disability “are often employed within the same system of normativity to...shore up able-bodied white identities.”\textsuperscript{93} Likewise, in the thirteenth-century Jacobus de Voragine’s \textit{Legenda Aurea}, two saints swap a white man’s cancerous leg for a dead Ethiopian man’s leg, an act that Micah Goodrich argues “relies on Black embodiment as an interface for white salvation” and reminds us that “premodern curative fantasies of health, wellness, and whiteness are racialized.”\textsuperscript{94} The History similarly uses disability and race together to demonstrate miraculous Christian power. But the History does not represent impairment and race as parallel discourses. Instead, it depicts the racialized body itself as impaired or defective.

\textbf{“As Beautiful of Hue”: Intersectionality and Black Women}

The History’s depiction of Ethiopians becoming white stands as one of the first English texts depicting skin colour as a hierarchy, as most Europeans did not consider themselves to be “white” until much later. English texts before the History have almost no depictions of the English as white.\textsuperscript{95} Several Old English and Anglo-Latin texts from the same period as the History described the English as white, such as Ælfric’s account of Pope Gregory the Great and the enslavedAngles, or Goscelin of St. Bertin’s \textit{Legend of Edith}, both of which portray English people as white.\textsuperscript{96} Both Ælfric and Goscelin represent whiteness as desirable but without portraying other skin colours as undesirable. Even the Junius images (Figures 1–3) do not imply that the angels are white before they turn black; the loyal angels are just ink outlines, their skin the colour of the manuscript page. The History, however, makes white skin preferrable to black skin. It suggests that the Ethiopians wish to become white. The narrator states that, after being told that that their husbands had become

\textsuperscript{91} The \textit{King of Tars}, ed. John H. Chandler, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015), line 577.


\textsuperscript{93} Lewis, “‘Blob Child’ Revisited,” 161–62.


\textsuperscript{95} On whiteness in Old English texts, see Momma, “Theater of Race,” 417–21.

white, the Ethiopian women “woldan ðæs ylçæ wilniæn” (wished that same desire) as their husbands (18.21). That they wish for what their husbands wanted implies that they believe their husbands desired to become white. More than any other figures in the History, the Black women are aware of their otherness in the eyes of white men. The women wish for whiteness, exemplifying Fanon’s internally split Black subject, as well as the modern colonized Black subject’s psyche.

The History is perhaps the first surviving English text to claim white skin is more beautiful than black. The wives and sons pray to the Rods, yet only the sons change colour: “þa wurdon þa twege cnihtæs al swa fægeres hiwæs swa heoræ fæderæs wæron 7 þa modîra wæron alswe swearte swa heo ær waeron” (then the two youths were as fair of hue as their fathers, and the mothers were as black as they were before) (18.22–24). Scholars have claimed this is the first instance when the word “fair” (“fægeres”) means “light-skinned” rather than “beautiful,” but that may not be true.97 The sons are described as being “swa fægeres hiwæs” (as fair of hue) as their fathers, a phrase that up until this point in English literature could only have been read as meaning “as beautiful of hue.” There is nothing in the text that suggests that it must mean “as light of hue.” The Middle English Dictionary does not identify another example of “fair” meaning “light” for almost a hundred years.98 Instead, the History seems to say that the whitened sons are now as beautiful of colour as their white fathers, while their mothers remain as Black as they were before. This is the most explicit hierarchy of skin colour in an English text to this date.

Christian authors in western Europe represented Black women as the epitome of ugliness, but no previous English text did so through comparison to white skin. Medieval French and English writers represented Black women as ugly.99 In England, monastic writers like Goscelin of St. Bertin pictured Black women as abject but capable of God’s love: “No woman of Ethiopia is so black, none so ugly, so foul, if she love him purely, that she does not draw grace and splendour from his beauty.”100 The representation of Ethiopian women as limit cases for Jesus’s love echoes the History’s depiction of Blackness as unbeautiful, but none of these instances contrast black skin to white.

Yet here, at this early moment of anti-Blackness, the Ethiopian women are the ones who interpret the skin colour, suggesting that Blackness gives them access to deeper insight than whiteness does. They interpret the divine meaning of the events: “Dá clypoden heo 7 cwædon Nu hit is swutel hwa godes willæ ær iwroht hæfde” (Then they spoke and said “Now it is clear who earlier has wrought God’s will”) (18.24–5). The wives interpret their own enduring Blackness, just as their


98 MED, s.v. fair, adj.

99 De Weever, Sheba’s Daughters.

100 Barnes and Hayward, trans., “Goscelin’s Liber confortatorius,” 194.
husbands earlier recognized the power of the Rods (something that neither Moses nor David could do). The History thus presents a multivalent Blackness, since the wives’ statement suggests the abjectness of (gendered) Blackness and underscores the Ethiopians’ unique access to knowledge. Only the wives can interpret God’s will in transforming their sons but not themselves. Their persistent Blackness, also, seems to grant them knowledge.

The women say it is clear who wrought God’s will, yet it is not at all clear to readers. Thomas Hill argues that their statement refers to Eve’s original sin, as he assumes that their statement means that the men wrought God’s will and are thus whitened as a reward. However, the Ethiopian women never say that the men wrought God’s will. Their statement can mean that the men obeyed God (and thus are whitened) or that the women obeyed God (and thus remain Black). If we follow Hill’s reading, then the women recognize that they are expelled from this new family because of Eve’s failure to obey the Law of the Father. In that interpretation, salvation has a limit: Black women. They are faithful, they pray, and they know sacred history, yet they are irrevocably Other due to the intersection of their gender and race. However, Hill’s reading is not the only one possible here, as the Ethiopian women’s elusive statement destabilizes any simplistic racial binary. Whatever they mean, their ability to interpret divine will suggests that they are not wholly abject.

Black feminist thought can help us interpret the Ethiopian women’s complex, elusive depiction. For over a hundred years, Black scholars have used intersectional theory to explain how medieval systems of gender and race interlock. Medievalist and classicist Anna Julia Cooper wrote the 1892 book A Voice From the South, which first articulated the specific position of Black women through extensive references to medieval history. While Black feminists examined gender and race together throughout the twentieth century, Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term “intersectional” in 1989, drawing on Cooper’s work to explain how American law ignores the interlocking oppressions of Black women. Intersectional theory returned to premodern studies via landmark books like the 1994 Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period, edited by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, and Kim Hall’s 1995 Things of Darkness, which drew heavily on Black feminism (including Crenshaw’s work) to examine how gender and race interweave in early modern England. Jacqueline De Weever is another important figure in this history, though

she does not explicitly invoke intersectionality. In recent years, more medievalists have suggested the importance of intersectional theory for understanding medieval literature and culture. As Hendricks recently noted, “What [premodern critical race studies] marks is an insistence on intersectionality in scholarly analyses of the past.”

Fanon himself considered the interlocking systems of gender and race by dividing *Black Skin, White Masks* into chapters on Black men, Black women, white men, and white women.

Intersectionality can also show us the Ethiopian women’s abjection and agency. Nicholas R. Jones argues that white-authored early modern Spanish texts depicting Black woman need not be read purely as racist white texts but as representing moments of Black agency. Analysis of such texts, Jones argues, “animates black Africans’ agency, empowers their resistance, and highlights their African cultural retentions in early modern Spain.” Likewise, De Weever argues that Nicolette of the French romance *Aucassin et Nicolette*, after discovering she is an emir’s daughter, dons blackface in order to claim “her cultural inheritance for a brief period,” rather than simply for disguise. Such moments reveal, even in medieval European texts, much more complex agency for the women of colour portrayed in them than many critics have assumed. The *History* likewise suggests a complex treatment of Black women. The Black women challenge simplistic medieval hierarchies of skin colour through their own interpretive power and abjection.

Or at least they did for a while. The episode in the *History* with the wives appears in no other version of this story. We do not know if it was in the Latin original or was a unique invention of the West Saxon translator. Napier suggests that the *History* was written in Latin and then translated into Old English, based on the persistence of Latin words in the Old English translation, but that does not mean this specific episode came from a Latin original. Only in this homily does the incident of the Black figure turned white become a family drama.

It is possible that this episode with the Ethiopian women did not serve the agendas of later authors as well as the image of transformed men did. If the now-lost Latin version of the *History* had this episode, then we might question why the epis-

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sode of the Ethiopian family was excised from texts likely influenced by the Latin version, like the *Cursor Mundi*. Part of the answer may be that the Black women did not fit neat ideological patterns from later texts. As De Weever notes, medieval epics tended not to depict Black mothers at all, nor to depict marriages between Black- and white-skinned couples.\(^{110}\) This image of the Ethiopian family of Black mothers and white men may have been too threatening to later writers, who chose to excise Black women altogether, rather even than portraying their abjection. The *History* portrayed Black women as less beautiful than white men but also as uniquely capable of interpretation and insight. Yet, in the aftermath of the *History*, Holy Rood narratives began to elide the Black women altogether and instead to focus on the conversion and whitening of Black men.

**The Afterlives of the History**

Subsequent versions of the Rood-Tree story describe the Ethiopian men's Blackness as hideous and their bodies as deformed. Their transformation make them white, beautiful, and able-bodied. The fourteenth-century *Cursor Mundi* depicts the men as Ethiopian Muslims and emphasizes their monstrosity:

Men say never before þat houre  
So frowarde shapen creatoure  
Of her blac hewe was selcouþe  
In her brestis þei bare her mouþe\(^{111}\)

(Men never found before that hour  
Such ugly-shaped creatures.  
There was wonder at their black hue.  
In their breasts they bore their mouths)

Men wonder at the Muslims’ Blackness and their deformity. Yet the Muslims also recognize the Rods that King David carries with him and remark that the Rods will become the Cross for Jesus to hang on. While these texts attribute divine knowledge to the Black characters, they also are much more viscerally anti-Black and explicit in their depiction of black bodies as deformed than is the *History*. The Muslims characterize themselves as ugly: “Ful loplye are we” (we are completely loathsome).\(^{112}\) These Black Muslims represent themselves with the “inferiority complex” Fanon described centuries later, here only a fantasy of white European writers.\(^{113}\) The English desire for Black people to proclaim their own inferiority predated English colonization and plundering of Africa by centuries.

These figures reveal the anti-Blackness of the so-called monstrous races of travelogues, by having Black Muslims mimic those monsters. The *Cursor Mundi*

\(^{110}\) De Weever, *Sheba’s Daughters*, 37 and 191.  
\(^{112}\) Horrall, ed., *Southern Version of the Cursor Mundi*, 1:301, line 8105.  
\(^{113}\) Fanon, *Black Skin*, 2.
depicts the Ethiopians with their faces on their chests, a feature associated with the beings known as Blemmyae, who appear in collections like *Wonders of the East*. Their name comes from a historical Ethiopian nation known as the Blemmyes. The *Cursor Mundi* implies that the English continued to connect the Blemmyae and the Blemmyes. The early English drew many Blemmyae, such as the example here from the Anglo-Latin version of *Wonders of the East* in Bodleian Library MS Bodley 614 (Figure 4). Bodley 614 does not connect the Blemmyae visually to Ethiopians, which it depicts with darker skin (Figure 5), unlike the *Cursor Mundi*, but the textual and historical tradition that the English inherited connected Blemmyae with Black people. Isidore of Seville describes the Blemmyae as living in Libya. Depictions of the so-called monstrous races went hand-in-hand with racial thinking, especially in wonder literature. These depictions suggest that the Blemmyae retained connections to living Black people and that travelogues and depictions of the “monstrous races” were


crucial to medieval race-making. The tradition of travel writing and “wonders” continued to influence these depictions of Black people. De Weever argues that medieval manuscript art—including that associated with the *Wonders*—contributed to the developing white European racism about Black women.\textsuperscript{116} We see the history of anti-Blackness stretching out from the *History*. The interconnections of monstrosity, disability, and preternatural knowledge increase in subsequent texts. The Black women, however, are erased.

**The History and History**

Scholars have dismissed the idea that the *History*’s depictions of Ethiopians are racial. Hill characterizes the Ethiopian episode as only offensive to a modern reader: “in an episode that seems almost *specifically designed to offend modern sensibilities*, David uses the Rods to whiten the men but not the women of a family of black Ethiopians.”\textsuperscript{117} Hill suggests that the Middle Ages were a pre-racial time, and that readers who perceive racial dynamics in this story of black-skinned people gratefully being whitened are reading anachronistically. But reading the text through Fanon pushes us to see such episodes as part of Europe’s long tradition of anti-Blackness. Rather than agreeing that the Middle Ages were a pre-racial golden age, Fanon suggests that premodern racial formations have a kind of weight, what he called the “density of History,” bearing down on the present and crushing the fantasies, ideologies, and cultural ideas of the modern European world into their current shape.\textsuperscript{118} For Fanon, there is not a gap between the past and the present, because the past has never stayed in the past; he argues that “[t]he black man...is a slave to the past.”\textsuperscript{119} The past exerts influence in the present, as a gravitational force that keeps modern people orbiting inherited racial ideas; Fanon argues that “those Whites and Blacks who have refused to let themselves be locked in the substantialized ‘tower of the past’” can escape alienation.\textsuperscript{120}

Fanon shows we cannot view the racism of the past as disconnected from the present, because it *still haunts us in the present*. That Fanon ends his account of racism with an argument about historical inquiry suggests how he saw history—and the professional European discipline of history—as part of institutional European racism. As Edward Said wrote, “the whole point of Fanon’s work is to *force the European metropolis to think its history together with the history of colonies* awakening from the cruel stupor and abused immobility of imperial dominion.”\textsuperscript{121}


\textsuperscript{118} Fanon, *Black Skin*, 205.

\textsuperscript{119} Fanon, *Black Skin*, 200.

\textsuperscript{120} Fanon, *Black Skin*, 201.

Like Fanon, Jacqueline De Weever considers how race, gender, and sexuality interweave, but De Weever focuses on Black women rather than on Black men. Many scholars find Fanon's treatment of Black women troubling, though scholars like T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting have defended Fanon's record on gender. De Weever spotlights how medieval French texts constructed both white and Black women as part of a larger project of European Christian imperialism. She argues that skin colour bisects medieval European depictions of Muslim women, allowing white Muslim women to convert and enter the fold of humanity, while marking Black Muslim women as fit for death.

However, many medievalists argue that such *longue durée* ideas of race court anachronism and simplistic thinking. For instance, white scholars have often accused De Weever—one of the first medievalists to analyze medieval race—of being anachronistic and ideological. Heather Arden’s 2000 review in *Speculum* of De Weever’s book *Sheba’s Daughters* condemns De Weever for anachronism: “I find simplistic these judgments of epic poems that condemn them as unrealistic, incoherent, and intolerant of Otherness; this perspective refuses to acknowledge that it, too, is based in ideology, in *the modern ideology of acceptance of diversity*.” Arden suggests that medieval people did not think they were intolerant for demonizing Black Muslim women, so we cannot think that about them either. Arden further disparages De Weever’s work for “condemn[ing]” these poems because their “values are not hers.” Albrecht Classen has likewise criticized De Weever for what he sees as her imposition of modern theory: “die Anwendung moderner Theorie für die Interpretation dieser mittelalterlichen [T]exte mehr Probleme bereitet als erhellend wirkt” (the application of modern theory for the interpretation of these medieval texts causes more problems than it illuminates). Classen finds De Weever’s scholarship an unconvincing modern imposition on the medieval texts.

Even white scholars interested in medieval theories of difference have described theories of medieval race as anachronistic and unsubtle. Suzanne Conklin Akbari, for instance, criticizes scholarship that relies “upon anachronistic categories, especially that of ‘race.’” Akbari argues that there is “a value in recognizing the founda-

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123 De Weever, *Sheba’s Daughters*, 100.


125 Arden, Review of *Sheba’s Daughters*, 684.


tions of modern racism in medieval texts,” but she states that scholars must recognize the differences in medieval “categories of bodily diversity.”128 Akbari contrasts the work of De Weever (a scholar of colour) and Thomas Hahn (a white scholar). Hahn’s theorizing is “nuanced” and points to how Hahn “intelligently” makes “clear that there is a profound disjunction between medieval perceptions of bodily diversity and post-Enlightenment constructions of racial difference.”129 She then critiques De Weever’s theories of medieval difference:

Others have been somewhat less subtle in their use of “race” as a defining term for medieval depictions of Saracen alterity, and have even argued that the Middle Ages gave rise to racism itself: for example, Jacqueline de Weever states that depictions of black Saracens in the *chansons de geste* are “racist portraits. When skin color is linked to ideas of inferiority...racism is born.”130 Representing De Weever as “less subtle” than Hahn, Akbari echoes Classen and Arden’s insistence that race is an “anachronistic” category for the Middle Ages. Whiteness entrenches itself in part by assertions that studies of premodern race are ideological and anachronistic.

Scholars particularly lob the charge of anachronism at discussions of anti-Blackness. De Weever analyzes the history of skin colour, while Hahn’s article describes “the insignificance of color as a crucial marker” in the Middle Ages.131 Jean-Frédéric Schaub has argued against scholarship on medieval race that focuses on “a chromatic perspective, which reflects an American obsession but certainly does not encompass the subject of racial categorization.”132 Schaub suggests anti-Blackness is natural and universal and therefore not racist: “it’s important to address what appears as a universal revulsion at darker colouring, for instance sub-Saharan African skin.”133 David Goldenberg suggests that “the transcultural preference for lighter-skinned women” is universal and biological.134 Such attribution of anti-Blackness to nature pervades much scholarship, both inside and outside medieval studies. It is prevalent when it comes to discussions of Black women and misogynoir.135 This is what makes scholars like De Weever and Fanon so important.

135 Moya Bailey coined the term misogynoir to describe “the specific violence of representational imagery depicting Black women” (“New Terms of Resistance: A Response to Zenzele Isoke,” *Souls*...
Scholarly accusations of anachronism are refusals to recognize the weight of the history that Fanon describes. White scholars who insist on deracinated historicism are denying what Fanon calls the "tower of the past." Borrowing language from Fanon, Mary Rambaran-Olm argues that the field of early medieval studies is "locked in whiteness" and that white scholars often associate whiteness with scholarly rigour, keeping scholars of colour out of the field. They refuse to allow for histories like De Weever’s, which trace a long European genealogy of anti-Blackness. Accusations of anachronism are a kind of medievalist “white innocence,” to adopt Gloria Wekker’s term. Rambaran-Olm argues that Fanon calls for us to pay attention to how history is produced:

As Fanon puts it, “History takes place in obscurity and the sun [BIPOC] carry with [us] must lighten every corner.” Seeking ways to ensure the longevity of Early English studies within the history of the premodern will require us to examine how we teach, how we read and analyze premodern English texts or artifacts, and who our desired audience is and should be.

New voices and methodologies that bring history to life in medieval literature are vital for the field’s survival.

Fanon’s approach to history could allow medieval studies to take a hatchet to its own frozen white narratives. Medieval studies cannot exorcise the legacy of its “white fathers” without recognizing that texts like the *History* encouraged the veneration of the white father for over a thousand years. The *History of the Holy Rood-Tree* is part of the precolonial European literary and cultural vilification of Blackness that contributes to the colonial mindset. Yet it also attributes positive qualities to Black people that became lost as the centuries wore on.

Medieval studies has an opportunity to historicize the historical-racial schema that Fanon describes colonizing the minds of Black subjects. The *History* features one of this schema’s earliest English appearances. It represents whiteness as the desire of the Black subject, far before the violence of colonization and racism caused Black people to internalize such desires. Reading Fanon with the *History* here allows us to pinpoint the cause of internalized racial inferiority: “Let us have the courage to say: *It is the racist who creates the inferiorized.*” Fanon—like De Weever—suggests that linking black skin to inferiority implies a system of racism, whether medieval or modern. The *History* first marks white skin as desirable in con-

139 On Fanon and medieval history, see also Sturges, “Race, Sex, Slavery.”
141 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 73.
trast to black skin, a grim milestone in the history of English racism. While previous studies have dated the emergence of European whiteness to the thirteenth century, the History suggests that the valorization of whiteness began to appear before then. In the History we can see the rough shape of the white person, its hour quickly coming round, slouching towards Europe to be born.

The History of the Holy Rood-Tree shows how precolonial racial ideologies influenced the age of colonialism, and scholarly disinterest in the History shows how much work extending the insights of postcolonial theorists remains to be done. Doing this work on eleventh- and twelfth-century texts helps undo the racial and national structures of medieval studies. Rambaran-Olm highlights the racial characteristics of the Old English vs. Middle English studies divide, which imagines “Anglo-Saxon” England as its own distinct racial entity prior to the Norman Invasion. Yet such periodization has not always ruled medieval studies. As Momma points out, prior to the late nineteenth century, handbooks for Old English language learning often included post-Conquest texts such as The Grave (also preserved in MS Bodley 343, alongside the History). Late nineteenth-century nationalism led those textbooks to mark the Norman Conquest as the definitive close of one period of English literature. Textbooks replaced such early Middle English (or late Old English) texts with more texts perceived to reflect the early English “nation,” such as those by King Alfred. In the wake of the recent decision by many medievalists to cease using the term “Anglo-Saxon,” itself a racist relic of the age of colonialism, we have an opportunity to reimagine the edges of early medieval English studies and to return to these abandoned texts. The shift away from the scholarly use of the term “Anglo-Saxon” helps tear down some of the scholarly border-walls that the age of Victorian imperialism built. In doing so, we may recover texts crucial to our understanding both of the Middle Ages and of our present moment.

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142 On periodization’s racial politics, see the special issue of New Literary History 52, nos. 3/4 (2021).
145 Davis, “Periodization.”
146 Momma, “Boy Meets Girl (?).”
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**Abstract:** A twelfth-century manuscript preserves an English homily known as the *History of the Holy Rood-Tree*. In it, the three Rods of Moses perform a number of miracles, including turning the skin of several Ethiopian men and their sons white. The Ethiopian mothers, however, remain Black. The *History* is perhaps the earliest surviving English text to create a hierarchy of skin colour, and to explicitly state that white skin is more beautiful than black skin. This article frames the *History* as an early chapter in the history of European depictions of Blackness. The Ethiopians know and respect God, and the *History* represents their Blackness as abject yet affording insight into God that white characters do not have. At the same time, they implicitly desire whiteness, in an uncanny precursor to the internalized feelings of inferiority that Frantz Fanon described for modern Black people. The *History* reminds us of the truth of Fanon’s claims that the European past holds modern Black people prisoner, and that it is important to write long histories of race and anti-Blackness.

**Keywords:** anti-Blackness, skin colour, Old English literature, race, homilies, Ethiopians, Rods of Moses, Frantz Fanon