
Article

Race, sex, slavery: reading Fanon with *Aucassin et Nicolette*

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Abstract In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon suggests that the history of slavery, and indeed the history of the construction of race itself, continues to enslave those constructed as black in the present. While much contemporary race theory identifies the construction of race as a phenomenon coextensive with modernity, medieval texts like *Aucassin et Nicolette* suggest a much deeper historical sedimentation of racial constructions, as well as their imbrication with class and gender. An examination of *Aucassin et Nicolette* in terms of these imbrications reveals the constructedness of these categories in the distant past, and allows them a more thorough historicization: the historical continuity from the Middle Ages to post-Hegelian phenomenology challenges traditional periodizations and extends Fanon's understanding of the relations among race, class, gender and history.

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Like it or not, the past can in no way guide me in the present moment... The Negro, however sincere, is the slave of the past.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Frantz Fanon's discussion of race and historicity in the final chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* can seem contradictory. On the one hand, the past enslaves the black man of the present; on the other, the past must be disavowed, absented from the present. It is inescapable, but it must be escaped, and this very necessity carries a suggestion of its ongoing power in and over the present.



What is this dangerous past whose enslavement of the black present must be made absent? Fanon later suggests that it is the history of slavery itself: ‘I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors’ (Fanon, 1967, 230). It is also the history, or indeed the very concept, of race: ‘The Negro is not. Any more than the white man’ (Fanon, 1967, 231). Race is thus not only a cultural construction, but an oppressive one ripe for deconstruction. In declaring an existential freedom from both race and slavery, Fanon invokes a lengthy history of the relations between the two, a history often wrongly imagined as coextensive with the history of modernity. In this essay, I hope to contribute to the historicization of race, sex and slavery by examining a specific premodern text. This historicization also poses a challenge to the traditional periodization that separates medieval from modern, past from present. This essay thus sets historicization against periodization. It is my suggestion that medieval romance and post-Hegelian phenomenologies of race, sex and slavery can be mutually illuminating.

I explore the medieval sedimentations of race, sex and slavery, which must be acknowledged in order to be escaped, through an examination of their representation in an early thirteenth-century French comic romance, the anonymous *Aucassin et Nicolette*. This text links its preoccupation with race and slavery to sex and sexuality, a concern also shared by Fanon, as in his image of sexual exploitation in Indochina: ‘When one remembers the stories with which, in 1938, old regular sergeants described the land of piastres and rickshaws, of cut-rate boys and women, one understands only too well the rage with which the men of the Viet-Minh go into battle’ (Fanon, 1967, 226–227). The prostituted women of a subjugated race can also be found in the thirteenth-century romance, and this medieval experience too is sedimented in the modern phenomenology of race. Sara Ahmed, for example, has theorized the relationship between race and sex in terms of orientation and orientalism: ‘orientations are reproduced through the very ways in which “others” are available as objects for love’ (Ahmed, 2006, 127). Medievalists like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen associate western Christian orientations both toward and away from ‘others’ with the medieval ethnic or racial Other as well as with the monster, and specifically with Islam: as he says, ‘like monsters, racist representations inevitably conjoin desire and disgust. The Saracens were no exception’ (Cohen, 2001, 119).¹

Like Ahmed, postcolonial, feminist and queer theorists, at least since Fanon, have complicated Hegel’s deconstruction of the lordship/bondage (or master/slave) binary² by considering it in light of further apparent binaries that, on closer examination, also turn out to be intimately related, including the male/female binary and the racial and/or religious same/other binaries. I will focus primarily on the medieval text itself and, guided by Fanon and Ahmed, ask whether a consideration of the high medieval representation of such binaries might in any way subtend these later intellectual developments, and if so, whether medieval romance can be applied to contemporary theory as a way of understanding its

1 On the non-Christian Other as monster, see also Giffney (2012). On western Christian fantasies of Islam, see also Uebel (1996). On the concept of a ‘monstrous race,’ see Asa Simon Mittman’s essay in this issue.

2 On the effects of these different translations of Hegel’s *Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*, see Davis (2008, 45–46). She suggests that Kojève’s *maîtrise et esclavage* ‘is perhaps most faithful, in that it faces up to the repetitive historical logic of slavery in the feudal narrative’s mediation of sovereignty’ (Davis, 2008, 46).

sometimes invisible history – whether, indeed, a line can really be drawn between medieval and modern.

Standard works on race routinely assume that such a line can be drawn, and indeed, that race is a defining component of modernity. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott take the deployment of the term ‘race’ by François Bernier in 1684 to be its first use ‘in something like its contemporary meaning of a major division of humanity displaying a distinctive combination of physical traits transmitted through a line of descent’ (Bernasconi and Lott, 2000, viii). In a related move, David Theo Goldberg finds an emergent discourse of race in the early modern period, accompanied by a justification of race-based enslavement: ‘In 1510, Aristotle’s doctrine of natural slavery in *Politics* was first suggested as a justification for applying force in Christianizing the American Indians’ (Goldberg, 1993, 25). Goldberg, indeed, declares that ‘premodernity lacked any conceiving of the differences between human beings as racial differences,’ while ‘modernity comes increasingly to be defined by and through race,’ and thus that ‘medieval exclusion and discrimination were religious at root, not racial’ (Goldberg, 1993, 24).

Nevertheless, Goldberg also suggests that ‘the medieval experience furnished models that modern racism would assume and transform according to its own lights,’ citing in particular the late medieval figure of the wild man (Goldberg, 1993, 23). Thus even for Goldberg, medieval attitudes toward reason, civilization and religion are sedimented in modern racism, the twin inheritance of race and slavery from which Fanon must declare himself free.³ Andrew Cole suggests that Hegel scholarship has neglected not just modern history, but the survival of medieval feudalism into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany as well, and contends that this medieval relationship provides the model for Hegelian lordship and bondage (Cole, 2004). Such scholarship suggests that we have reason to consider further the extent to which the medieval experience of race may be sedimented in the modern.

Nicolette, the adventurous heroine of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, oscillates among and, I suggest, deconstructs the categories of race, class and gender, if we define medieval race, with several recent historians, not only in terms of genetically inherited biological characteristics or skin color, but also as a constellation of geographical determination and social practices, the medieval models that Goldberg finds sedimented in modern racism. Robert Bartlett observes that in medieval racial discourse, genetic descent was ‘overshadowed’ by environment and culture (Bartlett, 2001, 45). Nicolette crosses racial boundaries, then, in terms of social and geographical identity: she is both Saracen in origins and French by upbringing, Muslim by birth but Christian by baptism.

As for biology, the extreme whiteness of her skin is regularly emphasized in the text: ‘the daisy flowers that she broke underfoot, which fell back onto her feet, were completely black in comparison with her feet and legs, so white was the girl’ (‘les fleurs des margerites qu’ele ronpoint as ortex de ses piés, qui li glissoient sor le menuisse du pié par deseure, estoient droites noires avers ses piés et ses ganbes,

3 Hannaford provides a detailed examination of such sedimentation, devoting somewhat more space to a discussion of issues related to those noted by Goldberg (Hannaford, 1996, 87–126).



tant par estoit blanche la mescinete’) (Roques, 1963, 14, hereafter cited by page number; translations are my own). This description is perhaps not what one might expect of a Saracen, given the dark-skinned descriptions of black Saracen warriors, and indeed of black Saracen women, in other texts.⁴ But Saracens who have been converted to Christianity are sometimes described as becoming miraculously white-skinned at the moment of baptism or acceptance of Christianity: Thomas Hahn points out that the *Cursor Mundi* story of King David’s conversion of the Saracens and *The King of Tars* both employ this trope of the black Saracen miraculously whitened as a sign of conversion (Hahn, 2001, 13–15).⁵ Nicolette too has been converted to Christianity; her godfather the viscount declares that he ‘bought her with my own money, brought her up and baptised her and made her my goddaughter’ (‘l’avoie acatee de mes deniers, si l’avoie levee et bautisie et faite ma filole,’ 4). Nicolette’s whiteness, then, may be associated with her baptismal status rather than her racial origins, exemplifying not only the permeability of these identity categories, but also the imbrication of racial and religious ones. If Muslims are dark-skinned, Christians are white and the conversion from one to another is physical as well as spiritual. It is worth pointing out that when she returns to her native land, she recognizes her relatives – but they do not recognize her: ‘she was not such a young child that she didn’t know very well that she had been the daughter of the king of Cartagena’ (‘ele ne fu mie si petis enfes que ne seust bien qu’ele avoit esté fille au roi de Cartage,’ 34); ‘Fair sweet friend,’ said [the king], “tell me who you are”’ (‘Bele douce amie,” fait il, “dites moi qui vos estes,”’ 35).

Jacqueline de Weever suggests that when Nicolette escapes from her Saracen family in order to return to France and Aucassin, she blackens her skin not only as a handy disguise while traveling through Saracen territory, but also as ‘a way of claiming her cultural inheritance for a brief period’ (De Weever, 1994, 322).⁶ But since what she claims is skin color, it seems in modern terms cultural and racial simultaneously: blackness or (on Nicolette’s return to Beaucaire) whiteness of skin troubles the identity categories usually associated with Islamic/Christian religious and cultural difference on the one hand and modern racial difference, based on phenotype and descent, on the other. It is also worth noting, again following De Weever, that the term used both for this blackening of her skin and its re-whitening on her return to France is ‘oinst’ (‘anoint’): ‘she took an herb and anointed her head and face, so she was all black and stained’ (‘si prist une herbe, si en oinst son cief et son visage, si qu’ele fut toute noire et tainte,’ 36); ‘she took an herb called “esclair” and anointed herself, and was as beautiful as she had ever been’ (‘si prist une herbe qui avoit non esclaire, si s’en oinst, si fu ausi bele qu’ele avoit onques esté,’ 38) (De Weever, 1994, 319). The implication seems to be that the movement from white to black and back again might be understood also as the taking-on of multiple identities; these successive metaphorical baptisms allow Nicolette the possibility of identifying as both black and white, Christian and Muslim. The differences among these identities are thus elided.

4 See Hahn (2001, 10–19).

5 For quotation and further discussion of these passages, see Asa Simon Mittman’s essay in this issue.

6 The episode in question occurs in Roques (1963, 36).

Scholars have regularly theorized the role of a fantasized history in the construction of race. As Jeremy Weate points out in his analysis of Fanon's 'The Lived Experience of the Black,'

Black skin is indissolubly connected to a history constructed by a white imaginary.... The body image of the black subject is spliced asunder by historical means: an autonomously constructed self-image is thwarted by a fantastical parody of history.... Fanon is therefore demonstrating that essentialism is a discourse derived from a perverse repression of history. (Weate, 2001, 174–175)

Or as Fanon himself puts it, he has been woven 'out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories' (Fanon, 2001, 185).⁷ The medieval components of race illustrated in *Aucassin et Nicolette*, including though not limited to skin color, must be included among those details and stories, and may indeed, in their linkage with an enemy religion, help explain the white imaginary's obsession with, and antipathy to, black skin.

Nicolette's blackness in the disguising episode is also a class and gender marker: she has learned that she is a Saracen princess by birth, but she blackens her skin also in order to disguise herself as a lowly – and male – jongleur. Thus class and gender too overlap the categories of race and religion, and in changing her skin color Nicolette crosses boundaries within all four of them as well as among them. Indeed, Nicolette crosses the boundaries of class in an even more extreme fashion: not only is she a princess while in Saracen lands (as well as in the carnivalesque world of Torelore⁸) and a jongleur en route back to France – but in France itself at the beginning of the story, she is a slave. A medieval association between race and servitude, derived from the Biblical curse of Ham (Genesis 9:25), has also been noted by such scholars as John Block Friedman and Dorothy Hoogland Verkerk: 'Ham's curse ... provided biblical underpinnings for the enslavement of African peoples and the idea that they were more animals than men' (Friedman, 2000, 101; Verkerk, 2001).⁹

Nicolette's blackness thus associates her with servitude.¹⁰ Her position as the viscount's chattel is, perhaps, a bit anomalous in thirteenth-century France. Chattel slavery was not widespread in France by this point, though it was not unknown, as historians since Marc Bloch have noted. Bloch indeed makes several points relevant to Nicolette's situation:

In [thirteenth-century] Europe slavery, in the strict sense of the word, had not entirely disappeared.... [I]t was permitted without difficulty for infidels or schismatics. Even baptism would not save them.... In Mediterranean France.... the number of slaves was not absolutely negligible. (Bloch, 1975, 64)

Beaucaire is, indeed, located in southern France. However, since slavery was in decline even if not 'absolutely negligible,' Nicolette's status might also be regarded as a displacement both in time, from the earlier history of European

7 This essay also appears as Chapter 5 of Fanon (1967). Problems with the latter translation, beginning with its misleading title, are discussed in Macey (1999, 8).

8 The Torelore episode occurs in Roques (1963, 29–33).

9 See also Verkerk (2001). For a thorough examination of the complexities of this tradition, see Braude (1997).

10 See the episode in Roques (1963, 4, cited above). On the history of such slave-buying transactions, see Heers (1981, 187).



slavery, when Marseille was a major port in the slave trade, and in space. In the Iberian peninsula across the Pyrenees as well as in northern Italy, chattel slavery, especially of Muslim captives, was still commonplace in the thirteenth century, according to more recent historians like William D. Phillips, Jr (Phillips, 1985, 97–113); indeed, Jacques Heers also includes Provence among the areas in which such ‘captives are above all Muslims,’ (‘captifs sont avant tout des musulmans,’ 24) and suggests that Marseille remained important in the slave trade well into the thirteenth century (Heers, 1981, 26).¹¹ Nicolette’s baptism, too, reflects the experience of purchased Muslim female slaves (Heers, 1981, 66).¹²

In terms of gender, Phillips also points out that in such areas, a female slave might raise her position in society through marriage to a free man, as Nicolette does at the end of her story (Phillips, 1985, 99, 102). It is interesting to note, however, that despite Aucassin’s pursuit of Nicolette, he himself seems to think of her equally as a potential wife and potential concubine. The possibility of such a marriage is what worries his parents, and Aucassin’s use of the term ‘donés’ in Section 2 seems to imply giving Nicolette to him in marriage as well as simply giving her: Aucassin himself has just used the verb ‘doner’ in the simple sense of ‘give,’ while his father then immediately uses it in the sense of ‘give in marriage.’¹³ Elsewhere the other characters, including Aucassin himself, think of his relationship with Nicolette as one of concubinage. Her godfather the viscount, for instance, assumes that Aucassin wishes to use Nicolette as a concubine, and warns that this path will lead him to hell. Interestingly, Aucassin does not protest that he intends to marry Nicolette, but declares that he prefers hell to heaven anyway, since all the most interesting people go there (6). In other words, he appears to agree that his sexual behavior with Nicolette might not be sanctioned by the Church. Later, when Nicolette is planning her initial escape from her imprisonment by the viscount in Beaucaire, Aucassin protests that ‘the first man who saw you and was able to, would take you quickly and put you into his bed and make you his mistress’ (‘li premiers qui vos verroit ne qui vous porroit, il vos prenderoit lués et vos meteroit a son lit, si vos asoignereroit,’ 14). Neither the viscount nor Aucassin can imagine Nicolette unambiguously as anything but a concubine, at least not until after the narrative has revealed her true status as a Saracen princess: in the final prose section of the *chantefable*, after her song has revealed that status to him, Aucassin directly mentions marriage (38–39).

In her simultaneously gendered and racialized association with concubinage, Nicolette conforms to the reality of some female slavery in the Middle Ages. Ruth Mazo Karras points out that, like Nicolette, ‘[t]he majority of female slaves were probably not purchased primarily for sexual purposes, even though they may have been used in that way’ and that ‘once purchased they were sexually available to their masters’; furthermore, ownership of Muslim women also emasculated Muslim men (Karras, 1994, 8, 24).¹⁴ Nicolette’s whiteness is significant in this regard as well: according to Heers, European slaveowners preferred not to include slaves of color in their households (Heers, 1981, 223).

11 Heers gives several thirteenth-century examples of Muslim women enslaved by European Christians (Heers, 1981, 31–44). On the dissemination of slavery from Marseille through inland Provence, see Heers (1981, 115–117). On Muslims enslaved in Christian France, and on the Provençal role in the slave trade, see also Verlinden (1955, 1: 748–762, 792–799).

12 For a more detailed consideration of slavery and baptism, especially of women, and on the domestic duties of female slaves, see Heers (1981, 98–108, 158–163).

13 See the Roques edition, 2, ll. 23–33, for this exchange (Roques, 1963).

14 On concubinage of Muslim female slaves in Christian households, see also Heers (1981, 214–224).

Thus sex is imbricated with race, as gender and sexuality are imbricated with slavery, and as slavery is imbricated with race and race with religion: *Aucassin et Nicolette* demonstrates the consciousness not only of the ways in which the intersections of identity categories determine one's different places in a heterogeneous cultural world, but also of how these intersections may alter over the course of time. The text conceives of identity, that is, not only as an intersection, but as a construction, a constantly shifting assemblage of categories.

Race conceived as religious difference, then, cannot be separated from race conceived as difference in color or from race conceived in terms of geographical location. And the comic romance world of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, perhaps unexpectedly, provides a reasonably accurate depiction of how these racial concepts are also imbricated with slavery. Sara Ahmed's description of orientalism as orientation is thus anticipated in these medieval configurations: 'the making of "the Orient" is an exercise of power: the Orient is made oriental as a submission to the authority of the Occident.' And, the Orient 'is also desired by the West, as having things that "the West" itself is assumed to be lacking... If the Orient is desired, it is both far away and also that which the Occident wishes to bring closer, as a wish that points to the future or even to a *future occupation*' (Ahmed, 2006, 114–115). Neither in post-Hegelian phenomenology nor in medieval romance can race, sex, religion, geography and subjugation be separated.

Nicolette is always on the move, changing race, class, gender and religion. She is physically on the move too; unlike the inert and weepy Aucassin, Nicolette, like other figures of the 'Belle Sarrasine,'¹⁵ takes fate into her own hands, escaping from both Christian Beaucaire and Saracen Cartagena in order to achieve her reunion with Aucassin. The one place where she briefly comes to rest is the carnivalesque world of Torelore, which is characterized by gender inversions. Here the king labors in childbirth while the queen leads troops into battle, though the battle in question turns out to be more like a food fight. No wonder the Toreloreans want to keep Nicolette as their princess, since she too exemplifies their potential for category inversion. Torelore thus presents a carnivalesque version of the monstrous races familiar from medieval travel literature and geographical writings in the Plinian tradition, which also feature gender confusion – as well as blackness – among the exotic monstrosities associated with Africa. It is no accident that Nicolette's mobility makes her a suitable princess in this land of inversion and confusion.

Nicolette crosses boundaries of cultural, geographical, religious and class identity in order to allay the threat of racial colonization and enslavement. And racial and class differences, figured as monstrosity, are components of, or complementary to, the erotic. To return briefly to some theoretical implications of these observations, we should note that Hegel's lordship/bondage (master/slave) dialectic itself does not involve race, gender or sexuality. It does, however, precisely as a dialectic, deconstruct the Master/Slave binary in a way similar to what we have seen in medieval romance: the master, though he has external

15 On the 'Belle Sarrasine,' see Gilbert (1997, 222–225).



freedom, fails to achieve the recognition he initially sought because the slave is reduced to the status of a thing that cannot offer such recognition; the slave, on the other hand, at work in the world, discovers that he has a mind of his (or her) own and thus achieves an internal freedom through self-consciousness unavailable to the master:

But just as lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude in its consummation will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is...the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness. (Hegel, 1977, 117)¹⁶

Nicolette achieves mutual recognition in love: having learned, in her oscillations among slave and princess, Saracen and Christian, black and white, to manipulate the world like Hegel's laboring slave, she can ultimately approach Aucassin as wife rather than concubine. In Alexandre Kojève's formulation, 'the end of History is the *synthesis* of Mastery and Slavery, and the *understanding* of that synthesis' (Kojève, 1980, 45; emphasis in original). In deconstructing this opposition, thirteenth-century romances are performing a similar move, and we might ask whether this medieval understanding might be sedimented in Hegel's, in Fanon's, in Ahmed's and so on.

Recent scholars have reintroduced questions of race into the study of Hegel. Susan Buck-Morss, claiming that the Haitian revolution must have influenced Hegel's formulation, suggests that both Hegel himself and his interpreters are guilty of silencing this influence, Hegel for professional reasons and also because he was 'always a cultural racist' (Buck-Morss, 2009, 74). For his modern interpreters, on the other hand, it is a question of the 'historical categories by which we grasp' historical events:

The collective experience of concrete, particular human beings fall out of identifying categories of "nation," "race," and "civilization" that capture only a partial aspect of their existence, as they travel across cultural binaries, moving in and out of conceptual frames and in the process, creating new ones. (Buck-Morss, 2009, 111)

Buck-Morss counters this tendency with her call for a renewed universal history, which

engages in a double liberation, of the historical phenomena and of our own imagination: by liberating the past we liberate ourselves. The limits to our imagination need to be taken down brick by brick, chipping away at the cultural embeddedness that predetermines the meaning of the past in ways that hold us captive to the present. (Buck-Morss, 2009, 149)

Or, as she puts it earlier, 'The critical writing of history is a continuous struggle to liberate the past from within the unconscious of a collective that

16 There are numerous analyses of this aspect of Hegel's thought (for example, Taylor, 1975, 153–157).

forgets the conditions of its own existence' (Buck-Morss, 2009, 85). For Buck-Morss, what must be liberated specifically is the experience of the Haitian revolution, but I contend that we need to expand her insight: medieval texts suggest that we must also liberate multiple historical sedimentations of which Hegel and his interpreters remain unconscious. This kind of liberation might ultimately call into question the modern insistence on periodization, on separating modernity from premodernity, that I began this essay by critiquing.

Fanon cites Hegel in *Black Skin, White Masks* in order to point out the differences between the reciprocity explored in Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic and the reality of post-enslavement subjectivity. His analysis brings race into the picture, and describes its imbrication with slavery. Fanon thus corrects Hegel's disavowal, or unconsciousness, of race in his Master/Slave dialectic.¹⁷ Medieval texts may make explicit the non-linearity of race's development – an aspect of its history that theorists of modernity have been unable to provide. Medieval texts reveal that the history of slavery's imbrication with race and desire is far longer than such theorists have imagined. *Aucassin et Nicolette* both instantiates the history of slavery's imbrication with race and sex and reveals the constructedness of those very categories – precisely the deconstructive move for which Fanon calls. This historical continuity, from the Middle Ages to post-Hegelian phenomenology, challenges traditional periodizations that separate medieval from modern and assign race as a concept exclusively to the modern.

Fanon, to conclude, also registers the forces of desire in his analysis, and it is here in particular that we may observe the sedimentation of medieval racial theories like those we have observed in *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Fanon writes, 'I am white: that is to say that I possess beauty and virtue, which have never been black. I am the color of the daylight' (Fanon, 1967, 45). Like Nicolette's fluidity, Fanon's irony problematizes claims that white is beautiful, or even that one can unambiguously 'be' white. The black Fanon, like the Saracen Nicolette, can also lay claim to whiteness, and the fluidity that she represents in a comic mode is sedimented in his irony. History, we might say, consists of such sedimentations. Whether or not modern philosophy can adequately explain medieval culture, perhaps because of such sedimentations medieval culture is necessary to a historical understanding of racialized, gendered and classed modernity.

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17 See Gordon (1999) and Gibson (2003, 134).



(Brepols, 2011). His most recent book is a facing-page edition and translation of *Aucassin and Nicolette* (Michigan State, 2015) (E-mail: Robert.Sturges@asu.edu).

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