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# Toying with dance: A medievalist interprets *The Nutcracker* ballet

**Kathryn Dickason**

University Communications and Marketing, Simmons University, Boston, MA,  
USA.

**Abstract** This article draws attention to elements of medievalism in *The Nutcracker* ballet, which premiered in St. Petersburg in 1892. I argue that medieval tropes of sacred play are embedded within this postmedieval work of art. Interpreting medieval toy culture alongside Western classical dance, this article articulates how medieval religiosity informs aesthetic production and perception today. In conclusion, I touch upon a more disturbing side of ballet medievalism, which contributes to the otherization and racialisation of non-Christian dancers. In sum, this article suggests that premodern cultures can lend layers of significance to artistic creations of the modern era.

**Résumé** Cet article attire l'attention sur des éléments du médiévalisme dans le ballet *Casse-Noisette*, qui a été créé à Saint-Petersbourg en 1892. Je soutiens que les tropes médiévaux du jeu sacré sont intégrés dans cette œuvre d'art post-médiévale. Interprétant la culture médiévale du jouet aux côtés de la danse classique occidentale, cet article explique comment la religiosité médiévale informe la production et la perception esthétiques aujourd'hui. En conclusion, j'aborde un aspect plus troublant du médiévalisme du ballet, qui contribue à l'altérisation et à la racialisation des danseurs non chrétiens. En somme, cet article suggère que les cultures prémodernes peuvent donner des couches de signification aux créations artistiques de l'époque moderne.

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Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative ballets evoke an aura of medievalism. *Giselle* (1841), for instance, revolves around a medieval peasant maiden from the Rhineland, while *Raymonda* (1898) takes place during the Fifth Crusade. *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort* (1946) draws heavily from the medieval *danse macabre*. Despite the richness of ballet medievalism, Seeta Chaganti remains the sole scholar who has produced a sustained study on this topic. In her analysis of the Russian ballet *Raymonda*, Chaganti reveals how medievalism in dance entangles historical textuality and memorializing nostalgia (Chaganti 2011). Following Chaganti's provocation, this article identifies the medievalism embedded within *The Nutcracker* ballet. I also propose that these medieval elements help inform our reception and experience of dance today.

The story behind *The Nutcracker* originally came from an 1816 text by E.T.A. Hoffmann called *Nußknacker und Mausekönig* (The Nutcracker and the Mouse King). As a Romantic, Hoffmann stood in opposition to Enlightenment values. He was more interested in accessing authentic human experience than discoursing on rationality (NPR staff 2012). In his writings and musical compositions, Hoffmann often turned to the Middle Ages for inspiration.<sup>1</sup> In 1845, Alexandre Dumas adapted Hoffmann's text in his *Histoire d'un Caisse-Noisette* (The Nutcracker of Nuremberg) and, in doing so, tamed Hoffmann's dark Romantic impulses. Most balletic renditions gravitate toward Dumas' more sanitized version. *The Nutcracker* ballet premiered on December 6, 1892 at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg (Fisher 2003, 6–7). The illustrious French choreographer Marius Petipa began to work on the ballet, but after he fell ill, his Russian colleague Lev Ivanov took over (Beaumont 1941 [1938], 517). In collaboration with Petipa, the great Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky wrote the memorable musical score. (Notably, Tchaikovsky composed his last opera, *Iolanta*, based on a medieval French duchess, in the same year as *The Nutcracker's* premier).

The ballet received mixed reviews. Russian critics loved the Waltz of the Snowflakes section from act I, among other things. But they also expressed harsh critiques and found the overall infantilization of ballet rather irritating (Fisher 2003, 12–13). However, today hundreds of *Nutcrackers* are performed every year in the United States alone. As dance studies scholar Jennifer Fisher demonstrates, this European classic eventually became a holiday tradition in the Americas.<sup>2</sup> *The Nutcracker* remains immensely popular and is often marketed as child-friendly, despite its inclusion of racist stereotypes of Middle Eastern and Asian cultures in act II.

This article unveils the deep medievalism that lies at the heart of this beloved ballet. In doing so, this study shows how medieval tropes of

1 For example, in 1816 Hoffmann composed an opera entitled *Undine*, which is a love story between a mermaid and a medieval knight, see Richardson (2020, 158).

2 To be clear, Fisher stresses that the modernization and Americanization of *The Nutcracker* occurred over decades of adaptation, modification, and negotiation (2003).



sacred play are embedded within a postmedieval work of art. In my analysis of act I, I interpret the protagonist's infatuation with the Nutcracker doll vis-à-vis medieval toy culture, particularly Christ dolls. Parallels between *The Nutcracker* and the Middle Ages ramify beyond childhood pastimes, as dancing with toys evolves into demonstrations of female empowerment, enchantment, and chivalry. But just as Christian religiosity can tease out the enthralling aspects of ballet medievalism (agency, transformation, romance), it can also highlight its disturbing elements (racism, caricature, domination). To conclude, therefore, I assess *The Nutcracker's* problematic representations of non-European cultures (i.e., its 'Arabian' and 'Chinese' divertissements) alongside depictions of Muslim and Mongol dancers in medieval European travel literature. In sum, this article reveals how premodern religion, aesthetics, and otherization inform how a monumental dance production was conceived and received in the nineteenth century and today.

## Act I: toys that come to life

Act I of *The Nutcracker* ballet emblemizes childhood. Much of the musical score reflects the motifs of youth and innocence. Tchaikovsky believed in the purity of ballet and its link to childhood, which informed many of his compositions for dance (Hurley 2007, 164). Children often comprise the majority of the cast members for act I of this ballet. In act I, scene 1 (i.e., 'The Party Scene'), the parents of female protagonist Clara Stahlbaum (or Marie, as she is called in Hoffmann's text) are hosting a Christmas party. As the guests gather and dance, a peculiar man arrives. This figure is Herr Drosselmeier, Clara's godfather. He is a skilled toy and clockmaker, and presents the children with various gifts—including mechanical Harlequin, Columbine, and Toy Soldier dolls. Memorably, Drosselmeier gives Clara a Nutcracker doll. Hoffman's text describes the Nutcracker doll as rather ugly, and its primary purpose is to crack hard nuts. Nevertheless, Clara is enthralled by the gift. Long after the party has ended and the household has gone to bed, Clara returns downstairs to see her beloved Nutcracker. In act I, scene 2 (i.e., 'The Transformation Scene'), mystery and magic permeate the narrative. While Clara is dreaming, the toy soldiers become real soldiers. The animated Nutcracker leads them into battle against an army of enlarged mice, subjects of the Mouse King. With Clara's strategic help (she throws her shoe at the enemy), the Mouse King perishes, the battle is won, and a transformation transpires. The Nutcracker becomes a real boy (or a man in some versions); he is now the Nutcracker Prince. He leads Clara through a flurry of snowflakes, and act I ends with the couple journeying toward the



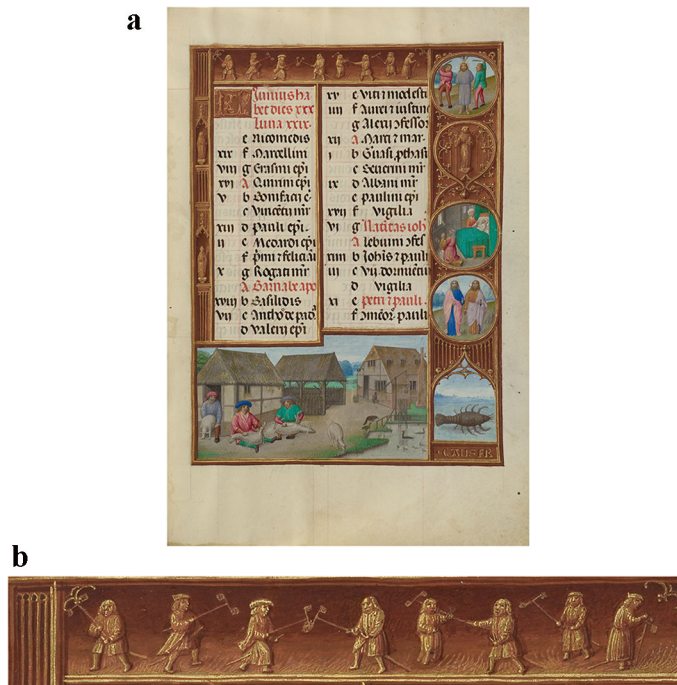
- 3 The original St. Petersburg production included a final ‘Apotheosis’ featuring ‘a large beehive with flying bees, closely guarding their riches’ (Wiley 1985, 337). For Damien Mahiet, the bees and beehive were a nod to the czarist regime, as they evoked themes of hierarchy, order, productivity, and kingdoms (2016a, 157).
- 4 Hoffmann’s original text begins the story in the Middle Ages with fantastic characters, whereas later chapters follow Marie/Clara in a more contemporary setting. In most ballet adaptations, the narrative action begins with Clara and her family.
- 5 Dance historian Jennifer Homans explains that the Russian émigré choreographer George Balanchine wanted to evoke not just fun, but also the mystery pertaining to Russian Christmas in his *Nutcracker* production. Along these lines, Balanchine preferred Hoffmann’s more serious text to the saccharine imitation by Dumas (Homans 2022, 344–45).
- 6 See also McCormick (2015). Moreover, Lucia Ruprecht stresses that Hoffmann was deeply interested in the uncanny, which relates to his fascination with dolls mimicking humans (2006, 61).

Kingdom of Sweets (or Confiturembourg, as it is called in the original version). In act II, Clara arrives at the Kingdom of Sweets, meets the Sugar Plum Fairy, and observes national dances. The ballet ends with Clara awaking from her dream and cradling the Nutcracker doll.<sup>3</sup>

Though act I of *The Nutcracker* takes place in the nineteenth century, it does contain some identifiable medieval elements.<sup>4</sup> For example, the ballet’s Christmastide setting recalls what musicologist Mary Caldwell calls the ‘winter dance season’ of medieval liturgy, which began with the Feast of St. Nicholas (December 6) and continued through to Epiphany (January 6). *The Nutcracker* has a strong focus on youth, while medieval dances and liturgical processions around Christmastime commemorated the Massacre of the Innocents, the boy bishop, and, of course, the baby Jesus (Caldwell 2022, 20–21, 24). Contrary to today’s commercialized attitudes toward Christmas, the holiday was solemn and sacred for nineteenth-century devotees of the Russian Orthodox Church. Certainly, there were festivities and recreation in St. Petersburg at this time of year, but Russians’ experience of Christmas, like that of medieval Christians, demanded a deep reflection upon the birth of Christ (Homans 2022, 344).<sup>5</sup> Despite the secularization of *The Nutcracker* in contemporary times, Fisher concludes that the ballet continues to exude a ritualistic tenor: ‘*The Nutcracker* isn’t just another aesthetic performance. (...) It’s also a wonderfully flexible, ritual-like, resonant phenomenon. And with rituals, repetition doesn’t equal boredom—it equals power’ (2003, 194).

By uncovering medieval approaches to toys and play, observers might come to more creative readings of the role of Clara in *The Nutcracker*. One of the highlights of the ballet is when Clara receives the Nutcracker doll as a Christmas gift from Herr Drosselmeier. Clara’s deep attachment to this doll lends more depth and nuance to her character and imbues the ballet with an aesthetic of enchantment. Moreover, Herr Drosselmeier contributes to the elements of ingenuity and play by introducing the children to his mechanical dolls. The presence of robotic toys in *The Nutcracker* correlates nicely with diverse automata, puppetry, and dolls in medieval material culture. In both the ballet and the Middle Ages, play is closely associated with kinetic animation.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, several premodern cultures produced toys, including dolls. However, what may be unique about medieval European toy culture is its propensity toward animacy and devotion. For instance, puppet-like contrivances could be used in religious ceremonies, and hundreds of Palmesels, or wooden and wheeled statuettes of Christ on a donkey, survive (Kopania 2017a, 37; Kopania 2017b, 8–9; Harris 2019). During the staging of Mass, mechanical figures of angels assisted the priest and flew down to the altar to help consecrate the host (Tripps 2011, 339; Truitt 2015). As Michelle Oing has shown, medieval bust reliquaries



**Figure 1:** A: Calendar for June, from the Spinola Hours. Bruges, c. 1510. J. Paul Getty Museum, MS. Ludwig IX 18, fol. 4r. B: Youths playing with toys (detail), from the Spinola Hours. Bruges, c. 1510. J. Paul Getty Museum, MS. Ludwig IX 18, fol. 4r.

oscillated between animacy and inanimacy, thereby resembling puppets (2020, 28–29). According to art historian Elina Gertsman, Shrine Madonnas, or *Vierge ouvrantes*—complete with moveable, doll-like parts—offered a playful side to devotion (2015, 2–3, 9, 49, 102).<sup>7</sup> Medieval religious women played with dolls, specifically Christ dolls, as part of their devotional program (Bynum 2011, 40, 56; Klapisch-Zuber 1985, 310–29). The fact that the Nutcracker doll comes to life parallels medieval women’s palpable visions of the Christ Child, as well as the presence of diverse automata in the Middle Ages.

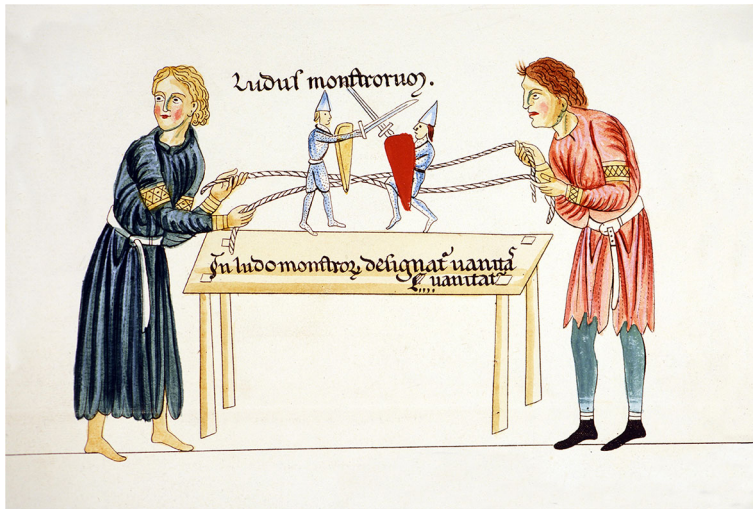
Concrete evidence for medieval children’s toys comes from archaeological excavations. Medieval toy expert Annemarieke Willemsen has produced pioneering studies on this lesser-known subject (Willemsen 1997; 2020).<sup>8</sup> In medieval manuscript images, artists often painted children playing with toys to represent *infantia* or *pueritia* (Sears 1986, 61, 131–32; Willemsen 2007–2008, 169; 2005).<sup>9</sup> For example, the *Spinola Hours* depicts youths playing with whirligigs along the upper margin on a

<sup>7</sup> See also Katz (2011, 84).

<sup>8</sup> See also Hadley and Hemer (2014, 2) and Orme (2001, 168–75). The sheer prevalence of these objects discounts Philippe Ariès’ famous thesis that childhood was unimportant in the Middle Ages (1962 [1960], 38–39, 128, 411–12).

<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, in Hoffmann’s original text, Marie/Clara is seven years old when she receives the Nutcracker doll, and in medieval Europe, *infantia* (the first ‘age of man’) typically lasted seven years.

- 10 Interestingly, the ballet movement known as a *pirouette*, or a turn on one leg, supposedly comes from *pirouelle*, a Burgundian word for a child's whirligig or spinning top (Greskovic 1998, 521).
- 11 This is an 1818 reconstruction of the original twelfth-century manuscript. For manuscript images that depict children observing puppet shows, see *Le Roman d'Alexandre* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley 264, fols. 54v and 76r).
- 12 'Pour dieu quon garde ma poupee' (Harrison 1994, 106).
- 13 A not-so-serious student training to be a merchant composed these lines in a fifteenth-century school notebook from Winchester.
- 14 Elina Gertsman demonstrates how images of the Christ Child were not always child-friendly. For example, the Child of Sorrows may hold the cross or even a whip, prefiguring Christ's Passion and thereby conflating infant vulnerability with adult sacrifice (2012, 66).
- calendar page for June (figs. 1a and 1b).<sup>10</sup> The conflation of images of play with portraits of holy individuals and texts specifying feast days momentarily recasts recreation as a sacred game. Likewise, Herrad of Hohenburg's *Hortus Deliciarum* (The Garden of Delights), an important devotional text, contains an illustration of two youths playing with knight puppets (fig. 2).<sup>11</sup> Toys were also visualized in more macabre settings. For instance, select *Totentanz* (Dance of Death) images depict the Infant holding a whirligig as Death leads him to an early grave (Oosterwijk 2002–2003, 256; 2006), whereas an image of a wet nurse from Guyot Marchant's printed *La Danse Macabre des Femmes* (The Dance of Death of Women) holds a rattle (fig. 3). In a manuscript version of Marchant's text, a dying girl implores her mother: 'Please take care of my doll.'<sup>12</sup>
- As these visual renderings of toys indicate, play was an integral component to medieval childhood. Other children's pastimes included walking on logs, tossing balls, playing tag, racing, playing with hoops, hearing stories, playing with flowers, digging in the streets, playing with marbles, and playing peek-a-boo. Children also imitated adult ceremonies such as royal entries, Masses, marriages, and so on (Hanawalt 1993, 66, 78; Schultz 1995, 51). English schoolboys even played during class, as these verses reveal:
- Fellows, be merry and make good cheer  
Dancing with jubilation [*Saltatis cum tripudio*]  
For we shall not all thrive this year  
Who are maintained at study [*Qui exhibemur studio*]. (Orme 2001, 157)<sup>13</sup>
- Yet play in medieval culture cannot be reduced to mere amusement. There is a more serious side to play, which, as I will later explain, also permeates *The Nutcracker*. Medieval artists sometimes depicted the Christ Child with toys. One particularly enigmatic figure appears in Hieronymus Bosch's reverse side of *Christ Carrying the Cross* (fig. 4). Here a nude male infant pushes a walking frame with his left hand and carries a whirligig or paper windmill in his right hand. Many scholars identify this toddler as the Christ Child (Willemsen 2001, 193; Gibson 1975–1976, 9). Interestingly, the other side of the panel depicts moments from Christ's Passion (fig. 5). This panel may have once belonged to a triptych that contained images of Christ bearing the cross, the Crucifixion, and the descent from the cross (Willemsen 2001, 193). The pairing of the Christ Child with a more mature image of Christ may present childhood and play as precursors to the Passion. Moreover, the whirligig may evoke the mill, which, in the Late Middle Ages, was a Eucharistic symbol that signified Christ's body being transformed into food (Gibson 1975–1976, 9, 12).<sup>14</sup> The association between Christ and playing showcased his humanity (see also Orme 2001,



**Figure 2:** Noble boys play with string puppets, from copper engraving by Christian Mortiz Engelhardt, 1818 (copied from Herrad of Hohenburg's *Hortus Deliciarum*, c. 1180). Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Alamy.com.

164). Similarly, *The Nutcracker* emphasizes childhood and toys as a prelude to transcendence. As such, the ballet offers viewers an aesthetic of enchantment that enables them to contemplate ultimacy and the quest for meaning (see also Fisher 2003, 171–94).

Similar to approaches to play in the Middle Ages, *The Nutcracker* ballet suggests that the playful side of childhood can facilitate one's passage into divine mysteries. During act I, boys ride hobby horses and collect toy soldiers while girls pamper their dolls. The sweeping popularity of the ballet suggests that any audience member can relive their childhood by observing the performance. On a deeper level, *The Nutcracker* highlights the magical and mystical properties of play. Clara's playful rapport with the Nutcracker doll causes him to transform into a real prince.

In this way, I suggest that Clara shares an affinity with the Christ Child, who was known to be a great gamer. Apocryphal infancy narratives describe how Jesus could tame dragons or turn his playmates into pigs (Sheingorn 2012, 261–62; Dzon 2017, 177; Smith 2006, 358–59; 2003, 273). Elsewhere in these texts, Christ crafts birds out of clay that fly out of his hands, whereas his spinning top demonstrates the longest spin (Willemsen 2007–2008, 179). A fourteenth-century manuscript miniature depicts the Christ Child riding on a sunbeam. Unfortunately, his playmates who attempt the same trick fall to the ground (fig. 6). Mary Dzon explains that these kinds of representations helped construct the Christ Child's identity as a *puer senex*, or a child with the maturity and wisdom of an

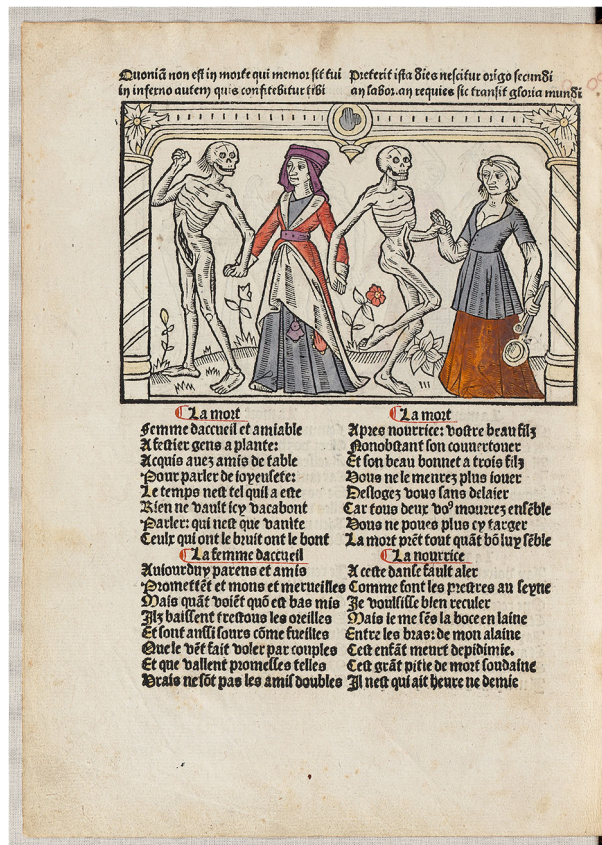


Figure 3: Death with la Femme d'Accueil and the Wet Nurse, from Guyot Marchant's *La Danse Macabre des Femmes*. French, fifteenth century. Bibliothèque Nationale de France Rés. Ye. 86, fol. aviii v.

adult or old man. This trope interested medieval Christians, as it distinguished Jesus from other normal boys (Dzon 2017, 53, 249). For Dzon, the playful Christ Child ‘was a Lord to be revered and one who often caused surprise, rather than an innocent Savior to be pitied. . . . Though the apocryphal Christ Child was human, he was clearly *sui generis* and thus a figure of great interest’ (2017, 249). By extension, Clara’s resemblance to (the apocryphal) Christ has a Christological significance. Her connection to Christ’s humanity and divinity amplifies the deeper, spiritual meaning of the ballet. This interpretation helps extend Fisher’s analysis of *The Nutcracker*, in which she underscores expressions of agency, achievement, and transcendence (2003, 170). For both the Middle Ages and ballet, toys are not just for children. These comparable approaches to toys and play suggest that the human imagination can





Figure 4: *Christ Child with a Walking Frame and Pinwheel* (reverse side of *Christ Carrying the Cross*) by Hieronymus Bosch. The Netherlands, c. 1480s. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Alamy.com.

summon playthings to life and, in turn, they can shape minds and hearts in formative ways.

Within a monastic setting, the most important function of medieval toys was to inspire religious devotion. Perhaps the most popular devotional ‘toys’ were Christ dolls. Starting in the mid-fourteenth century, these dolls were produced in large quantities. The Christ doll could be richly dressed, signifying Christ’s royalty, or could be naked, indicating his humanity. These dolls were housed in private homes, parish churches, and convents (Bynum 2011, 40). Certain dolls had elaborate headpieces, and there are even written accounts of customized bathtubs made specifically for them (Keller 2017, 78). Christ dolls could be used in liturgical performances, and some even contained relics (Bynum 2011, 56, 62–63). As Caroline Walker Bynum explains, many doll owners also used a cradle (*cunabulum*) or crib (*praesepe*) (2020, 62). For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art owns a fifteenth-century Netherlandish beguine crib for a Christ doll, which is a testimony to the tender care the doll would receive from medieval religious women (fig. 7). For Bynum, these beds symbolized the Church, and therefore had deep religious significance (2020, 73).<sup>15</sup>

15 In certain versions of *The Nutcracker* ballet, Drosselmeier gives Clara a miniature bed for her Nutcracker doll (Greskovic 1998, 259).



Figure 5: *Christ Carrying the Cross* by Hieronymus Bosch. The Netherlands, c. 1480s. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Alamy.com.



Figure 6: Christ Child sits on a sunbeam (detail), from a miscellany. French, c. 1326–1328. Bibliothèque Nationale de France Arsenal ms. 5204, fol. 1r.



Figure 7: Beguine crib for the infant Jesus. Netherlandish, fifteenth century. Metropolitan Museum of Art 1974.121a-d.



Figure 8: Lullaby scene, from *The Nutcracker*, Act I, with Natalia DaSilva as Clara and the Kansas City Ballet, 2016. Photograph by Brett Pruitt, Wikimedia Commons.

Medieval Europe also produced devotional manuals that instructed women on how to interact with Christ dolls. The 1488 booklet *Vander gheesteliker kintscheyt ihesu* (On the Spiritual Childhood of Jesus), for

example, states that ‘one should swaddle the infant Jesus, lay him in his crib, bathe and wash him, play with him, rock him, lull him to sleep and sing to him’ (Ippel 2014, 337). The care given to Christ dolls mirrors Clara’s profound attachment to her Nutcracker doll.

Just as the Nutcracker doll is decidedly enthralling for Clara, the toy Christ was especially transformative for religious women. One of the most well-documented medieval doll owners was Margareta Ebner (d. 1351). On December 26, 1344, she acquired a doll at the mature age of 53. Margareta attended to the doll as a devoted mother would tend to her baby. In fact, her Christ doll remains intact today, and locals worship it as a contact relic (Bynum 2020, 65). Margareta’s *sacer ludus* informed her spirituality, as playing with the Christ Child infused her with grace (Kieckhefer 2012, 171–72). In her own writings, Margareta expressed: ‘I have an image of the child, our Lord, in a cradle. . . [And after the Lord spoke to me] I took the image out of the cradle and laid it on my bare breast, with great longing and sweetness; and felt then the strongest possible grace in the presence of the Lord’ (Ippel 2014, 338). Margareta’s actions resonate with the so-called ‘lullaby’ section of Tchaikovsky’s musical score. In this section of the ballet, Clara cradles the Nutcracker doll with her hands and dances gently with him. Her female friends also retrieve their own dolls and begin to execute swaying and rocking movements to the lullaby. A photograph from a recent Kansas City Ballet production of *The Nutcracker*, with Natalia DaSilva as Clara, captures this moment (fig. 8). This sweet image also recalls women’s lullabies, carols, and cradle songs that were popular in medieval England. These lyrics often drew upon the tender relationship between the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. Moreover, the medieval collective dance form known as the *carole* in France (or carol in England) is an ancestor to Christmas carols (Palti 2011, 369–71).

While I have thus far outlined several parallels between Clara and medieval religious women, I would not argue that *The Nutcracker* ballet presents Clara as a maternal or Marian figure per se. Her connection to the Nutcracker doll is imbued with a devotional gravitas and an aesthetic of enchantment, which helps structure her dream that occurs later in the ballet. By contrast, medieval women who played with dolls enacted a performance of motherhood. As scholars have shown, these religious actors practiced a type of *imitatio Mariae*; for example, Margareta’s maternal interaction with the Christ doll showcased her unique spirituality and proved to her community of nuns her closeness to God (Keller 2017, 83, 87; Ziegler 1993, 112). Numerous other women reported maternally charged visions of the Christ Child. For example, Marie d’Oignies (d. 1213) had visions of nestling the Christ Child between her breasts (De Vitry, cited in Rosenwein 2018, 375), whereas Gertrude van Oosten’s (d.



Figure 9: St. Hedwig, from the St. Hedwig Codex / *Vita beatae Hedwigis*. Poland, c. 1353. J. Paul Getty Museum, MS. Ludwig XI 7, fol. 12v.

1358) breasts would fill with milk upon contemplating the Nativity (Olson 2015, 156). According to Bynum, ‘possessing a Jesus doll, dressing it and putting it to bed, underlined for the nun or beguine the special association with the virgin mother of God that *was* her religious identity’ (2020, 72). Moreover, Richard Kieckhefer has demonstrated that the Christ Child played an important role in German sister-books. Many nuns and lay sisters envisioned Christ in the form of a beautiful child who could heal sick sisters with his gracious presence (2012, 167, 183). These women were drawn to Christ’s holiness as well as his playfulness. For instance, Mechthild of Hackeborn (d. 1298) saw great wisdom in the baby Jesus and yet enjoyed seeing him run around the altar and play with apples (Kieckhefer 2012, 187–88). These ludic moments were also ritually strategic, as they enabled cloistered women to enjoy a privileged access to Christ (Rubin 2012, 295–96).

Although not a mother figure, Clara, like medieval women, projects a sense of agency that transforms play into revelation. Just as medieval women’s remarkable imaginations could generate visions, Clara’s love for

16 However, Fisher does make a strong case for the spirituality and rituality of *The Nutcracker* in contemporary times (2003, esp. 171–94).

the Nutcracker—expressed most explicitly during her valiant battle scene intervention—helps him come to life. *The Nutcracker* is not often considered an overtly religious ballet.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, a sense of divinity emerges from the Nutcracker’s journey from inanimacy to animacy. For both Clara and medieval nuns, playing with dolls separated the boundary between mundane reality and what lies beyond. As Jacqueline Jung explains, the mere act of holding a doll in one’s hands could allow medieval practitioners to envision and grasp the divine (2010, 236, 240). Christ dolls and the Nutcracker blur the dichotomy between materiality and spirituality, or reason and enchantment. The imaginative autonomy of Clara and medieval women unleashes an atmosphere of wonder and constructs an alternative reality (see also Klapisch-Zuber 1985, 329). From the perspective of gender, Clara’s empowerment is noteworthy vis-à-vis the history of ballet. For Ann Daly, Judith Lynne Hanna, Christy Adair, and, most recently, Alice Robb, ballerinas suffer objectification and domination at the hands of male choreographers and misogynist onlookers (Daly 1987; Hanna 1987; Adair 1992; Robb 2023). Clara’s imaginative power and subsequent military prowess clearly upend the traditional image of a submissive and over-feminized ballerina. Juxtaposing Clara alongside medieval religious women, scholars and balletomanes alike may tease out moments of female agency within classical ballet.

A rather fertile correlation between Clara and medieval women may occur with St. Hedwig (d. 1243). According to her legend, she carried around an ivory statuette of the Virgin Mary. When Hedwig blessed people with the object, they were instantly cured (Jung 2010, 203–205; 2018; Gertsman 2020, 223–24). Supposedly, Hedwig was even buried with this image (Schleif 2009, 397). An image from the St. Hedwig Codex, now housed at the Getty Museum, shows Hedwig’s attachment to this doll-like figurine (fig. 9). A passage from the same codex reads as follows:

As was proper, she [Hedwig] truly venerated the Mother of the Lord above all the other saints. Therefore, she always carried with her a small ivory image, which she often took up in her hands in order to envelop it in love, so that out of passion she could see it more often and through the seeing could prove herself more devout, inciting her to even greater love of the glorious Virgin. When she once blessed the sick with this image they were cured immediately. Thus, it was confirmed and made known to all through the power of miracles, what greatness of merit she had already achieved, who, out of fervent love, diligently carried with her this image of the Mother of the Son of God ... (Schleif 2009, 382).

The miraculous powers of the Marian ivory statuette can help scholars to imagine the transformative potential that the Nutcracker doll radiates,



thanks to Clara's actions. Just as Mary heals the sick, Clara rescues the Nutcracker from the nightmarish Mouse King and his mousey minions. From a more phenomenological perspective, Clara's heroism transforms the Nutcracker from object to subject. Likewise, Hedwig's statuette is not a traditional art object, for it is imbued with subjectivity. As Michael Camille wrote, medieval objects have the potential to transcend objecthood, and thus 'would be better understood not as dead and decorative "objets d'art" in the museum but as toys in the animated fingers of devoted owners, like St. Hedwig' (1998, 126). In medieval devotional culture and *The Nutcracker* ballet, playing with images activates the imagination in formative ways. According to Michelle Karnes, medieval Christians were suspicious of the imagination, as it could bring forth demons. However, the imagination was also associated with truth and fulfilment. In the context of medieval piety, the imagination could transport the devotee to a mystical climax (2011, 2–5, 112). By tapping into the spiritual imaginary, interacting with dolls enabled medieval women and Clara to cultivate a higher plane of perception and transcend themselves.

*The Nutcracker's* tropes of imagination and becoming are perhaps best expressed in the dreamy interlude of act I, scene 2. In this section of the ballet, known as the 'Transformation Scene,' Clara is supposedly fast asleep. (In fact, much of the ballet's high drama takes place while she is dreaming). This dream element may be viewed as an homage to Hoffmann and his Romantic impulses. Moreover, as I shall later reveal, Clara's dream has much in common with medieval dream visions as well as medieval themes of courtship and chivalry. During most versions of the 'Transformation Scene,' Clara perceives a cameo of Herr Drosselmeier in an owl clock. Soon afterward, Drosselmeier appears in the living room. With sweeping arm gestures, he causes the objects of the room to move about and the Christmas tree to grow to an enormous size. Tchaikovsky's musical score dramatizes the experience of alchemy and transformation. As dance critic Jack Anderson writes, 'there begins a spacious melody on violin and harp, and with it the Christmas tree magically begins to grow of its own accord until the melody attains a tremendous climax' (Anderson 1979, 69; Hurley 2007, 170).<sup>17</sup>

The 'Transformation Scene' soon gives way to the equally gripping 'Battle Scene,' in which mice and animated toy soldiers rise up against one another in mortal combat. For dance historian Cyril Beaumont, act I, scene 2 demonstrates the transportive potential of fiction: 'by one of those metamorphoses common to fairyland, the familiar room becomes a battlefield, for toy soldiers come to life and, under the command of the Nutcracker, wage war against an invading horde of mice led by their king' (Beaumont 1941 [1938], 516). In medieval terms, the battle between the

17 Musicologist Roland Wiley compares musical elements from the 'Transformation Scene' to the end of act I of *The Sleeping Beauty*, an 1899 ballet also composed by Tchaikovsky (1985, 225–26).



18 Mahiet explains how Tchaikovsky used different musical keys for the Mouse/Rat King's death and the Nutcracker's transformation. He also notes that the baller's mice and rats may be related to nineteenth-century Russian pogroms against Jews, a trope later appropriated by the Nazis (2016, 140–41, 144).

19 Homans calls the courtship between Marie and Drosselmeier's nephew 'a sexual awakening' (2022, 345). However, I find the Balanchine version to which she refers rather infantilizing.

20 Years later, Kirkland revealed that this idealized portrayal was a façade, as she was suffering from a serious cocaine addiction during this period of her career (Hill-Roger 2018).

Nutcracker and the Mouse King constitutes a kind of *pyschomachia*, or a cosmic battle of good against evil. The greatest climax of this scene is when, following a military victory enabled by Clara's intervention, the Nutcracker transforms into a handsome prince.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, *The Nutcracker* contains all the elements of a fantastical dream and a formula for self-transcendence.

Thus far, I have identified medievalism within *The Nutcracker* ballet primarily through the spiritual and transformative properties of play. I would now like to offer one more correlation between medieval culture and act I of *The Nutcracker*. Moving beyond childhood and holy play, the relationship between Clara and the Nutcracker occasionally evolves into romance. In this way, I posit, *The Nutcracker* ballet integrates dance, courtship, and chivalry. Although certain ballet companies cast a very young (i.e., prepubescent) girl as Clara, other versions prefer an adolescent teenager or young adult to dance the role. When Clara is more mature, the ballet lends itself to a romantic tension between Clara and the Nutcracker Prince. (And in fact, in Hoffmann's original text, the youthful Marie/Clara ends up being betrothed to Drosselmeier's nephew (Wiley 1984, 4–6).)<sup>19</sup> In contemporary choreographer Alexei Ratmansky's 2010 production, the child Clara morphs into a young woman during the 'Transformation Scene.' Here she engages in a gracious *pas de deux* (partnered dance) with the Nutcracker Prince, accented with courtly bows to one another. In other versions, a more mature Clara and Herr Drosselmeier display a somewhat suggestive relationship. For example, in Rudolf Nureyev's 1967 production, Clara represents a girl becoming a woman. She and Drosselmeier dance a *pas de deux*, hinting that they are sexually attracted to one another (Balanchine and Mason 1977 [1954], 391; Anderson 1979, 149; Fisher 2003, 145). Likewise, the 1976 version that Mikhail Baryshnikov staged for American Ballet Theatre (New York) uses a mature Clara—immortalized by the exquisite ballerina Gelsey Kirkland—who is capable of falling in love (Balanchine and Mason 1977 [1954], 391).<sup>20</sup> The Pacific Northwest Ballet (Seattle) collaborated with visual artist Maurice Sendak for their 1983 production. In this version of the ballet, which is almost Freudian in its proto-eroticism, Clara faces the trials and tribulations of growing up and begins to experience romance (D'Avila 2014).

An attention to medieval European culture as the birthplace of chivalry can assist scholars in examining courtship motifs within balletic adaptations of *The Nutcracker*. Like the *domna* (desired lady) from troubadour lyric, Clara is an idealized woman. The Nutcracker Prince, likewise, demonstrates impeccable gallantry. In fact, in Hoffman's original text, the Nutcracker tells Marie/Clara that she inspired him to practice 'knightly courage' in his battle against the Mouse King. He then declares to Marie/





Figure 10: The dance of Love (detail), from *Le Roman de la Rose*. French, early fourteenth century. Chantilly, Musée Condé MS. 483, fol. 7r. Cliché: IRHT-CNRS.

Clara that he will be a knight devoted to her service until his death (Hoffmann 1853). When portrayed by older dancers, the quasi-romantic rapport between Clara and the Nutcracker Prince foreshadows the partnering between the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier in act II of *The Nutcracker*. During their *pas de deux*, the Cavalier presents the Sugar Plum Fairy on a pedestal, often lifting her high in the air and supporting her turns and balances. This kind of allegiance to the chivalric code is expressed choreographically in all of the classical ballets. According to anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku, ballet is rooted in European religious values, chivalric customs, and heteronormative rites of courtship (2001 [1970], 33–43). Dance scholar Jennifer Homans develops this point further in her new critical biography of the iconic Russian émigré choreographer George Balanchine (1904–1983). Homans writes, ‘in Balanchine’s mind, ballet was like chivalry, both in its aristocratic origins and in its ethics of devotion and self-denial in pursuit of a noble ideal. (...) And chivalry, like ballet, involved the adoration of women’ (Homans 2022, 454).<sup>21</sup> By the same token, the classical *pas de deux* from *The Nutcracker* contains lingering traces of medieval chivalry.

It is significant that motifs of medieval courtship and chivalry appear when Clara is dreaming. According to Jean-Claude Schmitt, medieval dream visions shaped the dreamer’s quest for a higher ideal. In doing so, dreams enabled the dreamer to access the powers of beyond (2003, 561).

21 Here, Homans writes specifically about Balanchine’s *Don Quixote* (1965), though her analysis of the chivalric texture of ballet can be applied to many other ballets and choreographers.



One wildly popular dream vision is the thirteenth-century *Le Roman de la Rose* (The Romance of the Rose), which narrates a Lover's quest. In this text, dance functions as a rite of courtship, embodies *fin'amor* (fine, perfect, or true love), and formalizes the Lover's allegiance to the God of Love. A fourteenth-century manuscript miniature of the *carole d'Amor* (dance of the God of Love) employs dance iconography to idealize further courtly love (fig. 10). The lovers dance in pairs, circles, or (for the benefit of the viewer) a linear formation. Birds perched in the trees evoke the sounds of spring, the prime season for courtship, whereas the lush trees recall a prelapsarian age. Guillaume's text also lends an ethereal atmosphere to the dance, thereby heightening the overall aesthetic of enchantment. Indeed, his tone is dreamy and phantasmagoric, which contributes to the aura of the dream vision. Like the Lover and his beloved Rose, Clara and the Nutcracker Prince represent an idealized partnership.<sup>22</sup> In the *Rose* and *The Nutcracker*, the otherworldly quality of a dream allows the fantasy to be fulfilled. Some thinkers even analogize dreaming and dancing. According to the philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Dance is like dreams: it is so inward [or intimate]' (2020, 11; trans. my own from French). *The Nutcracker* ballet and medieval romance employ dance to aestheticize and spiritualize the journey from innocence to intimacy. While the aura of enchantment began when Clara first encountered the Nutcracker doll, it comes to fruition when Clara and the Nutcracker Prince court one another. Toying with dance has now come full circle; Clara graduates from child's play to the game of love.

22 It is noteworthy that both the *Rose* and *The Nutcracker* emphasize youth. For instance, one of the courtly dancers from Guillaume's *Rose* is Joenesce, or Lady Youth. Like act I of *The Nutcracker* ballet, dance in the Middle Ages privileged the youthful (Schultz 1995, 51–52).

## Conclusion: another side of ballet medievalism

By interpreting *The Nutcracker* alongside medieval toy culture, I have highlighted some of the more exquisite aspects of ballet medievalism. But ballet medievalism has another side, which is quite unsettling. While the Christian context of toy culture enables a medievalist analysis of the agency, transformation, and romance implicit in *The Nutcracker*, the same context also shapes its racism, caricature, and sense of domination. In this extended conclusion, therefore, I consider possible connections between act II of *The Nutcracker* and racial tropes in medieval literature. My analysis is informed by recent studies on premodern race. Medievalists Geraldine Heng and Cord Whitaker have shown that racial difference—which could be based on factors other than skin colour, including religion, physiognomy, and climate—was well entrenched in the Latin West by the thirteenth century (Heng 2018; Whitaker 2015, 5; 2019). Writing on blackface, early modernist Noémie Ndiaye claims that racial impersonation onstage 'haunts the memory of the Western theatre industry' (2022,



**Figure 11:** Arthur Mitchell as Coffee in *The Nutcracker*, choreography by George Balanchine. New York City Ballet, 1957, photograph by Martha Swope. New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division.



**Figure 12:** Susan Freedman as Coffee in *The Nutcracker*, choreography by George Balanchine. New York City Ballet, 1975, photograph by Martha Swope. New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

2). Medieval race-making facilitated the otherization of dancers in travel literature and Crusades propaganda. I argue that medieval markers of race, namely religious otherness, constitute historical antecedents to racist stereotypes in *The Nutcracker* ballet.

The otherizing aesthetic of *The Nutcracker* takes place in act II, the Kingdom of Sweets. Here Clara encounters the Sugar Plum Fairy, a benevolent ruler whose vast domain includes diverse subjects and faraway cultures. As other scholars have suggested, female sovereigns in Russia, namely Catherine the Great, may have been the prototype for the Sugar Plum Fairy (Mahiet 2016a, 154–55; Mahiet 2016b, 138; Kaufman 2022).<sup>23</sup> The national dances performed before the Sugar Plum Fairy, Clara, and the Nutcracker Prince embody offensive ethnic and racial stereotypes (Fisher 2003, 103). In recent years, dance critics have vented their frustration concerning the ballet’s misrepresentations of Middle Eastern and Asian cultures. One critic simply stated that *The Nutcracker* is ‘blatantly offensive and racist’ (Robb 2014).

These problematic portrayals are especially evident in the Arabian (or ‘Coffee’) and Chinese (or ‘Tea’) Variations. Consider Balanchine’s production of *The Nutcracker*, which premiered in New York in 1954. For the Arabian/Coffee Variation, he initially cast Arthur Mitchell, the first Black dancer of the New York City Ballet. A 1957 photograph shows Mitchell bare-chested and donning a turban (fig. 11). He is surrounded by four child attendants dressed as parrots. During the dance, Mitchell executed sensual movements and smoked hookah onstage. Balanchine most likely exploited Mitchell’s blackness to accentuate the desired exotic aesthetic. Supposedly in 1967, Balanchine remade the Coffee Variation for a female soloist (Anderson 1979, 124–27).<sup>24</sup> Here the woman wore chiffon pantaloons, a jewelled bra, and a diamond in her navel. She enacts provocative feats of flexibility, including high leg extensions, deep *cambré* (arch of the back), and the splits, as dancer Susan Freedman displays in a 1975 photograph (fig. 12). The exoticized fantasy that this dance conjures has led Fisher to interpret it through the lens of Edward Said’s theory of orientalism (2003–2004; 2003, 104). As Said explained, ‘the Orient’ was a political fiction that worked to support the hegemony of another fictional entity: ‘the Occident’ (Said 1978, 1–2, 5, 7, 12, 22). Accordingly, Fisher invokes Said to unpack the exotic and erotic aspects of *The Nutcracker* that help construct ‘the East’ and arouse fantasies about Western imperial dominance. She identifies Nureyev’s version as especially pernicious. His Arabian Variation includes a pasha character and scantily clad harem girls who seem to parody Muslim prayer (Fisher 2003–2004, 151).

Another problematic moment in *The Nutcracker* ballet is the Chinese/Tea Variation. As dance critic Jack Anderson writes, ‘the China evoked by this piece is the quaint land of silk and porcelain that existed only in the imagination of nineteenth-century Europeans’ (1979, 72). In many balletic renderings, the Chinese Dance features exaggerated bows and deep knee-bends that appear ‘clownlike.’ Until recently, the New York City Ballet’s version included pointed fingers, rice-paddy hats, a Fu-Manchu-type

23 The Russian variation (‘Trepak’) in act II may also have imperial overtones. Mahiet suggests this dance is associated with the Cossacks and tsarist military command (2016, 148). However, others claim that this divertissement is based on Ukrainian folk dance that Russians appropriated without acknowledgment (Kaufman 2022).

24 Contradicting Anderson, I have uncovered ten archival photographs of a female soloist, Gloria Govrin, performing Balanchine’s ‘Coffee’ that were taken by Martha Swope in 1965. These photographs are part of the Billy Rose Theatre Division collection at the New York Public Library.



moustache for men, and geisha wigs for women (Fisher 2003, 98–100; Pogrebin 2018). Some ballet dancers would even wear eye makeup that made their eyes appear slanted, whereas women inserted chopsticks into their chignons (Robb 2014). Performing the Tea Variation has been especially painful for ballet dancers of Asian descent. In her recent memoir, *Swan Dive: The Making of a Rogue Ballerina*, New York City Ballet soloist Georgina Pazcoguin writes:

I never felt comfortable with this depiction of Asian culture. There I was onstage, a biracial woman with Asian Filipino heritage, improperly representing Chinese culture with an outdated caricature. It never felt right to me. (...) I could not do the dance seriously because it felt so wrong to be making fun of Asian heritage (2021, 202).

While many critics blame *The Nutcracker's* racist content on nineteenth-century orientalism, the othering of Islamic and Asian cultures has much earlier roots. Indeed, many of these Islamophobic and anti-Asian tropes are apparent in medieval travel literature and Crusades propaganda of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>25</sup> Marco Polo's *Le Devisement du Monde* (The Description of the World), for instance, describes the sensual beauty of female Islamic dancers while simultaneously invoking harmful slurs against Islam (Polo and Rustichello 2016, 34).<sup>26</sup> *Malanquin*, a story from a thirteenth-century collection of pious tales, features a shapely Muslim woman dancing beneath a veil who attempts (unsuccessfully) to seduce a Christian hermit (Anon., 1993 26–26). Writing during the Crusades, *Malanquin's* French author invests the Muslim dancing body with voluptuousness, illicit sexuality, and perdition. The dancer serves as a cipher for Islam, and, by extension, invites Christian crusaders to invade Islamic territories. Juxtaposed with *The Nutcracker* ballet, the presumed sexual availability of Muslim women in Crusades-era literature prefigures the odalisque-like dancer from the 'Arabian' Variation.

The fourteenth-century text known variously as *Mandeville's Travels* or *The Book of John Mandeville* also otherizes non-European dancers. When traveling through Cathay (present-day China), Mandeville described the courtiers of the Great Khan (i.e., the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan who founded the Yuan Dynasty in China).<sup>27</sup> Here he depicts female dancers as subservient and physically alluring (Mandeville 2011, 140, 142)<sup>28</sup>—not unlike the obsequious and cute stylizations of Chinese dancers in *The Nutcracker*. Reading ballet through the prism of medieval otherization reveals the long durational practice of caricaturizing and disempowering dancing Others.

When reading medieval texts alongside nineteenth-century ballet, one might be tempted to label premodern otherization as a precursor to

- 25 In a similar fashion, John Ganim compares medievalism and orientalism, as both are synonymous with escapism (2005, 4); whereas Donna Beth Ellard posits that medievalism is inherently colonial (2019, 237).
- 26 For an analysis of harmful terms wielded against Muslims in the Middle Ages, see Rajabzadeh (2019).
- 27 It is important to note that (Pseudo) Mandeville's text is highly fictitious and elaborates upon earlier travel accounts. Moreover, Kublai Khan died in 1294, whereas scholars place Mandeville's text between 1360 and 1370.
- 28 For medieval European stereotypes of Asian women, see Phillips (2014, 101–102). As Phillips notes, from 1279 to 1368 much of China was under Mongol control (2014, 109). Therefore, the Khan's court may have appropriated aspects of Chinese culture.



modern orientalism. Within this logic, crusaders embody colonizers and Muslims embody the colonized. However, I would like to articulate some reservations regarding this approach. As Kaya Şahin, Julia Schleck, and Justin Stearns have discussed, premodern Europe cannot be essentialized as a homogenous ‘West,’ and furthermore, several premodern Islamic dynasties, including the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals, exercised their own form of imperial rule (Şahin et al. 2021, 197–99). Moreover, emerging scholarship on medieval Islamic dance counteracts the stereotypical image of a sexy or submissive striptease. As art historian Lev Kapitaikin reveals, Islamic court dance was diverse and refined. Spectators included rulers, intellectuals, and military elites. Although some dancers were enslaved girls, they exerted degrees of political influence. Sufis imbued dancing with a cosmic and mystical aura. In doing so, their dances helped practitioners achieve self-annihilation, unification, and divine immanence (Kapitaikin forthcoming).<sup>29</sup> Theories of orientalism, colonization, and Western dominance, therefore, do not always accurately capture the power dynamics behind the medieval European sources. Instead, I would posit that dance functioned as a vehicle of racialization during the Middle Ages. Heng demonstrates that religious difference was wielded to construct racial difference: ‘[religion] could function both socioculturally and biopolitically: subjecting peoples of a detested faith, for instance, to a political theology that could biologize and define, and essentialize an entire community as fundamentally and absolutely different in an interknotted cluster of ways’ (2018, 3). Fabricating images of dancing Others, medieval writers and artists inscribed religious difference onto non-Christian bodies. This selective essentialization—and ultimately racialization—of human beings has significant consequences, for it ‘distribute[s] positions and powers differentially to human groups’ (Heng 2018, 27).

29 I thank Lev Kapitaikin for sharing with me his unpublished work on medieval Islamic dance.

30 However, dancers of colour have been cast as Clara elsewhere, such as Donald Byrd’s 1996 production entitled *The Harlem Nutcracker*. Since 2009, award-winning dancer and choreographer Debbie Allen has directed *The Hot Chocolate Nutcracker*, which features a racially diverse cast and a wide range of ethnic dance forms (Bokelberg 2020).

Recent scholarship challenges racism associated with the Middle Ages and medievalism. Jonathan Hsy’s *Antiracist Medievalisms* shows how people of colour have transformed ‘meanings of the medieval past for modern audiences. . . [These individuals are] political agents, thinkers, and creators in their own right’ who decentre whiteness in medieval studies and dismantle white supremacist elements of Euro-American medievalism (2021, 6). In a similar fashion, dancers, choreographers, and artistic directors are now fighting back against *The Nutcracker*’s racist legacies. For example, in 2019, the New York City Ballet cast Charlotte Nebres as Marie/Clara, making her the first Black dancer in the history of the role since Balanchine created it in 1954 (Kourlas 2019).<sup>30</sup> Phil Chan and Pazcoguin launched the ‘Final Bow for Yellowface’ pledge, which urges ballet companies to eliminate outdated and offensive stereotypes of Asians onstage (Chan and Chase 2020; Pogrebin 2018). As a direct result of this



initiative, the Pacific Northwest Ballet replaced Chinese Tea with the Green Tea Cricket to counter stereotypes of Asians, as the cricket is a two-thousand-year-old symbol of luck, fertility, and athleticism in Chinese culture (Chan and Chase 2020, 118). The Tulsa Ballet now includes martial arts in their Chinese divertissement, and the Boston Ballet features a Chinese ribbon dance. Ballet companies were further inspired to update their productions after the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, numerous artistic directors have now abandoned bamboo hats, Fu Manchu-type mustaches, head-bobbing, and pointy finger movements (Hernández 2021; Pogrebin 2018).

Taking a different approach, Becky Moore, Director of Columbia Dance (Vancouver, Washington), set her version of *The Nutcracker* in 1840s Vancouver. During this era, Indigenous populations (including the Cowlitz, Chinook, and the Confederated Tribes of the Grande Ronde), French Canadians, and other peoples interacted along the Oregon Trail (Tonthat 2022). These kinds of productions not only celebrate diversity, but also imbue those and their ancestors who have been impacted by colonization with agency, resistance, and resilience. In this way, it is possible for ballet to be reconstituted as an anti-racist project. With the shift from caricature (i.e., distortion and stereotype) to character (i.e., empathy and depth), these new *Nutcracker* productions reconceive ballet as a more inclusive, intercultural, and ethical form of art (Chan and Chase 2020, 53).

As this article has shown, medievalism is deeply embedded in ballet. Thus, the history of Euro-American classical dance is a longer, more convoluted narrative than is generally recognized. While dance historians often locate the origins of ballet technique in the Renaissance (Homans 2010, 3–11), the Middle Ages continue to haunt ballet's aesthetics, significance, and legacy.

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## About the Author

Kathryn Dickason is a Public Relations Specialist at Simmons University (Boston). She holds a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Stanford University, and



has published widely on Western medieval Christianity, performance, iconography, gender, Dante, and sign theory. Her first book, *Ringleaders of Redemption: How Medieval Dance Became Sacred*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2021. Currently, she is writing her second book on Western medieval dance iconography. E-mail: dickason@alumni.stanford.edu.

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