

17 For the different versions see Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 34–35. See also Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 1, 84–85.

18 Rutebeuf, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Edmond Faral and Julia Bastin, 4th ed. (Paris: Picard, 1977), 2:21.

19 See Ruth Mazo Karras, "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1990): 3-32; at 15–16.

20 Karras, "Holy Harlots," 32.

21 See Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 91 and 93; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story," in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. Lynda L. Coon, Katharine J. Haldane, Elisabeth W. Sommer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 36–59; at 45.

22 Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography," 45.

23 See Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale*, vol. 4 of the *Speculum quadruplex* (Douai, 1624; rpt. Graz: Akademische Druck&Verlagsanstalt, 1965), 503.

24 See Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, 36 n.21 and on Mary, Gillian Cloke, *'This Female Man of God': Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350–450* (London: Routledge, 1995), 218.

GENDER, SKIN COLOR AND THE POWER OF PLACE IN THE MEDIEVAL DUTCH ROMANCE OF MORIAEN

In the western European Low Countries in the later Middle Ages, a curious figure emerged in the Arthurian romance literary tradition¹. His name was Moriaen, and he was the title character of the thirteenth-century Dutch *Romance of Moriaen*.² What marked Moriaen as curious was not his occupation (he was a knight) nor his behavior (like most other knights, Moriaen was courteous and chivalrous, and he was in search of honor and adventure). What marked Moriaen as curious was his skin color: Moriaen was all black from head to toe, except for his teeth. Moriaen was the child of a black-skinned mother (the Queen of the Moors) and a white-skinned father (Sir Agloval, knight of King Arthur's court).

The *Romance of Moriaen* has its place within western medieval literature and art's exemplary genre of black and white interactions.³ The *Moriaen*, moreover, offers the opportunity for consideration from several different geographical, psychological, and gendered perspectives: we see the point of view of the Arthurian knight (Agloval), for example, who travels to the Moorish land in search of Lancelot, and we see the point of view of his son, Moriaen, who travels

to the Arthurian land in search of his father; we see the point of view of Agloval's lover, Moriaen's mother, who sacrificed her inheritance for their affair, and we see the point of view of the "maidens in distress" that Lancelot and Gawain encounter along the way; we see the point of view of King Arthur who is indebted to Moriaen and his bravery, and we see the point of view of the knights and the common people who run from Moriaen in fear of his blackness. In the *Moriaen*, moreover, each of these perspectives and pathways intersect: the worlds of black and white meet and converge, and the contours of each character's world view form a post-intersection landscape.

Moriaen begs close examination, particularly at the intersection of skin color and gender. Instead of portraying Moriaen's physical features as a combination of his black-skinned mother and his white-skinned father, *Moriaen* fully preserves Moriaen's mother's identity, through Moriaen, as a Moor. Although it may be true that all women in *Moriaen* are "placeholders," they are not all holding the same place⁴: skin color is the hinge, so to speak, on which that identity construction swings. In the first half of this paper, by highlighting significant moments of character interaction and individual reflection in the text of the *Moriaen*, I introduce the ways that skin color is used as a narrative device to facilitate the plot. It is a plot, moreover, whose every turn is precipitated by a different *function* that skin color performs. In the second half of the paper, I interweave these pivotal narrative moments with gendered readings of placement and position to advance an interpretation of later medieval negotiations of masculine and feminine identities. Through those lenses we can then view the power of miscegenation and geography in an age of ever-increasing boundary crossings.

Plot Review

The narrative begins at King Arthur's court, at mealtime. An unnamed knight enters the court on horseback, accusing Perceval of wounding him, so Gawain and Lancelot ride out to find Perceval. On the ninth day of their search, Gawain and Lancelot meet the black knight.

Ende recht opten negenden dach
 Quam een ridder jegen hen gereden
 Op een ors van sconen leden,
 Ende wel gewapent daer toe.
 Hi was al sward, ic segt u hoe:
 Sijn hoeft, lichame ende hande
 Was al sward, sonder sine tande;
 Ende wapine ende scilt, sekerlijc,
 Was al enen moer gelijc,
 Ende else sward else een raven. (418–27)

On the ninth day
 a knight came riding towards them
 on a handsome horse,
 and moreover he was well armed.
 He was entirely black, as I shall tell you:
 his head, his body and his hands
 were black all over, except for his teeth;
 and his armor and shield, to be sure,
 were those of a Moor,
 and black as a raven.⁵

Moriaen approaches Lancelot and explains that, according to his “custom,” he must fight with every knight he meets unless that knight answers his one question. Lancelot answers that he wants nothing but peace, but he will chastise the Moor for his discourteous approach. “The Moor” (Moriaen is unnamed at this point) assumes a fighting position, and he and Lancelot begin to fight, even before the Moor asks his question. Gawain stands nearby, and thinks to himself of Moriaen’s dark skin.

Hier bi hilt Walewein al stille
 Als een di vechten nine wille
 Noch breken die gerechte wet;
 Nochtan waende Walewein bet
 Dat ware die duvel dan een man
 Daer si waren comen an,
 Maer dat hine horde nomen Gode.
 Men had hem niet mogen ontstriden ode
 Hine ware di duvel oft sijn geselle
 Ende ware comen uter hellen,
 Omdat sijn ors was so groet,
 Ende hi was merre dan Lanceloet,
 Ende daer toe sward, alsict seide. (477–89)

Therefore Sir Walewein stood his ground
 as one who did not wish to fight
 nor break the chivalric code;
 nevertheless Walewein had thought
 that it was the devil rather than a man
 whom they had come upon,
 had he not heard him call upon God.
 They could not easily have resisted him
 had he been the devil or one of his
 minions come from hell,
 for his horse was so large
 and he was bigger than Lanceloet,
 and moreover black, as I have said.

Notice that it is Moriaen’s blackness that associates him with the devil, and his call to God that negates it. Moriaen and Lancelot are evenly matched, and neither yields to the other until Gawain parts them. Here Gawain scolds the Moor, calling him rash and foolish. After more skirmishing, Moriaen finally asks his question (that is, if they know the whereabouts of his father, Agloval), and Moriaen recounts the circumstances of his conception and birth. Agloval had gone to the land of the Moors and won the heart and sexual favors of a maiden, Moriaen’s mother. Agloval was at the time in search of Lancelot, and in order to remain faithful to that quest he had to leave Moriaen’s mother, but he swore to her that he would return when he had fulfilled his quest. He did not know that Moriaen’s mother was pregnant with their child. He never returned, and Moriaen and his mother were disinherited, by the law of their land, since she had been deserted and he left fatherless. Moriaen became a knight, and has been in search of his father ever since.

With tears streaming down their faces, Gawain and Lancelot take pity on Moriaen, and Lancelot surrenders his ill will.

Doe was die swarte ridder blide
 Ende scoet ane Lanceloets side
 Ende ontecte sijn hoeft aldaer,

Then the black knight was happy
 and, drawing near to Lanceloet,
 he bared his head,

Dat pec sward was openbaer;
 Het was di sede vanden lande:
 More sijn sward else brande.
 Maer datmen an ridders soude prisen
 Haddi also scone na sire wisen.
 Al was hi sward, wat scaetde dat?
 An hem was sake die hem messat;
 Ende hi was langer een halven voet
 Dan enech ridder bi hem stoet,
 Nochtan was hi van kinscen dagen. (763–75)

which was entirely black as pitch;
 that was the fashion of his land:
 Moors are black as coal.
 But he was well possessed, in his own way,
 of all things one praises in a knight.
 Though he was black, what of it?
 Nothing about him was unsightly;
 He was taller by half a foot
 than any other knight who stood next to him
 and moreover he was still a youth.

“Though he was black, what of it?” (771). In this scene, Moriaen’s qualities as a brave knight and a good fighter outweigh the negative associations of his skin color. His status and class position as a knight are more important than his blackness.

Moriaen, Gawain, and Lancelot ride together until they reach a fork in the road, and they decide to take different paths: Gawain and Lancelot in search of Perceval and Agloval, Moriaen back to Arthur’s court. But Gawain, apparently sensitive to how Moriaen might be received at the sea-crossing, says that if Moriaen is “misunderstood,” then he should return to the crossroads and follow Gawain’s road. The narrative then describes each of their journeys in turn.

Moriaen’s journey takes him on the road to the sea. Though he searched all day, Moriaen found no one whom he might ask of his father’s whereabouts, because everyone who saw him fled from him. He finds neither food nor shelter that night. All of Moriaen’s questions go unanswered because

Si worden alle soe vervard
 Van hem, allen die int scepe lagen,
 Doen si Moriane sagen,
 Die sinen helm hadde af gedaen,
 Hine mochte horen no verstaen
 Noch tale noch wedertale.
 Si vervarden hen altemale
 Om dat hi was sward ende groet.
 Elc stac ter zee ward sinen boet
 Ende ruemden die marine;
 Want Moriaen was in scine
 Als hi uter hellen ware comen.
 Si waenden den duvel hebben vernomen,
 Dise wilde daer verleden:
 Die first van hen mochte sceden

They were all so very frightened
 by him, all those on board ship,
 when they saw Moriaen,
 who had removed his helmet,
 that he might neither hear nor understand
 question nor answer.
 They were so utterly afraid
 because he was so black and tall.
 Each one of them put off from shore
 and headed out to sea in his boat;
 for Moriaen looked as if
 he had come from Hell.
 They thought that they had seen the Devil
 come to deceive them:
 the first one to break away

Hine wilde sanders niet ontbiden.
Doe wilde Moriaen weder riden:
Nieman ne horde na sine sprake,
Noch berichte van sire sake;
Si waenden allegader wel
Dat ware di duvel ende niemen el
Die daer quame opten sande.
Si togen alle vanden lande. (2408–30)

had no intention of waiting for the others.
Then Moriaen wished to ride on,
for no one would listen to him
or tell him what he wanted to know.
They were all entirely convinced
that it was the Devil and no one else
who came riding there on the sand.
They all sailed away from shore.

Moriaen, recognizing that his efforts are in vain, turns back toward the crossroads, where he comes upon the naked and bloody Gawain, who in good knightly fashion has gotten himself into a pickle trying to rescue a maiden in distress. Moriaen begins to fight off Gawain's many opponents, who like the seamen are frightened of him because they think he is the devil himself, with his black skin. Moriaen and Gawain eventually win the battle. Meanwhile Gawain's brother, Gariet, rides to the hermitage in search of Gawain and Lancelot. Gariet is afraid when he sees Moriaen, but Gawain assures him that Moriaen is a good knight, despite his skin color. Gariet brings news from Camelot: Arthur has been taken captive by the Saxons, and the king of Ireland has laid siege to Arthur's lands.⁶ The next day Gawain rides in search of Lancelot, and Gariet rides with Moriaen in search of Agloval.

While they are riding, Moriaen tells Gariet of his difficulty in trying to cross the sea the first time. Gariet suggests that he ride ahead and secure a boat and boatman for their passage, while Moriaen follows until they are ready to embark. When the boatman sees Moriaen riding toward them at the last moment, he tries to flee. Gariet ultimately convinces the boatman to carry them both. When they finally reach the other side they find Perceval and Agloval, and Moriaen is finally able to tell Agloval that he is his son, that the Moorish princess is his mother, and that he wants Agloval to come back with him to the Moorish land to keep his promise to marry his mother. Agloval says yes, he believes everything Moriaen has said, and that he will indeed go back to the Moorish land and keep his promise. They embrace warmly.

When they ultimately reach the kingdom of the Moors, Moriaen kills some fifteen noblemen who would refuse him re-entry, and thus keep Moriaen's inheritance for themselves. Word spreads fast, and the others in the kingdom yield to Moriaen all of his and his mother's heritage. The land, moreover, is given into the hands of his mother. They proclaim her queen over all the kingdom of the Moors, and the bridal feast is held for her and Agloval. They marry, and the celebration lasts for fourteen days. Pentecost is near, however, and soon Gawain, Lancelot and Perceval leave the Moorish land and return to Camelot. Arthur and the queen alike are "glad at heart" to hear the news of

Agloval's wedding feasts, and "of the valiant deeds that Moriaen had done in his own land" (Weston 147). Moriaen, Agloval and Moriaen's mother presumably live happily ever after in the land of the Moors.

The Power of Skin Color and Gendered Identity

Moriaen's skin color is woven intricately with his masculine identity: his blackness (like his aggressive behavior and menacing speech) is fearsome to the other characters, certainly, and it is in fact an aid to his "success" as a forceful and militaristic knight. Since his skin color and his height are the only biological factors that are noted in the text, they stand alone as identifications of Moriaen's masculinity; notably absent (but present in the comparable identity constructions of Gawain and Lancelot, who assist "maidens in distress") is the characteristic of hetero-"sexual assertiveness" that Louise Mirrer identifies as part of a medieval "real man's" identity. If Moriaen is "de-penised" (in relation to European and Moorish women), his reality, especially his masculine reality, is displaced, it is not signified. Nothing is said in the text, moreover, of his sexual relations in the Moorish land. Moriaen is, in other words, "de-penised" in that he does not embody the penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion, yet he is perceived as bestial and violent.⁷ Moriaen fits a narrow repertoire of "types": the supersexual stud and the sexual, aggressive, pugnacious "savage" on the one hand and the delicate, fragile and exotic "oriental" on the other⁸.

Skin color and masculinity in the *Moriaen* are interdependent and inseparable, and they act along the axis of power. Moriaen has been seen as illegitimate since his birth, and his attempts to assert his power (in a militaristic, "knightly" fashion, which is in a certain sense intended to achieve the power of legitimacy) are often thwarted because he has no one to fight, because his would-be opponents run away in fear. Moriaen is fighting an uphill battle from the start: he is disinherited, not because he is black, but because his mother was powerless in refuting the Moorish society's condemnation of her illegitimate child: she herself cannot seek Agloval, and she must wait (in disgrace) until her son is old enough to act on her behalf, and for his own sake, too.

It is important to emphasize that Moriaen's mother, the Queen of the Moors, is never actually given a name, although it is from her role as child-bearer that the entire plot of the romance unfolds. We must refer to her as "Moriaen's mother"; her existence depends solely on her male offspring. She is, in essence, a "placeholder": someone needs to be Moriaen's mother, but it really doesn't matter who that person is. Examining the roles played by the two other women in this story helps to further illustrate this point. When we first followed Gawain, we found him "rescuing" a "maiden in distress." The unnamed maiden is another "placeholder": someone needs to precipitate the plot, but it really doesn't matter who that person is. When we follow Lancelot's journey, we find

him also involved with a maiden in distress. This maiden in distress is yet another “placeholder”: again, *someone* needs to precipitate the plot, but it really doesn’t matter who that person is. It would be useful, however, if that person also happens to serve the function of reinforcing Gawain and Lancelot’s code of chivalry, which of course reinforces their masculinity. Both maidens in distress fulfill this role. The author is unsuccessful in preserving, or even developing, female gendered identities.

Conclusion: Geography and the Power of Place

Moriaen’s mother’s identity and her position as a placeholder become more complex when the knights cross Arthur/Europe’s borders into Moriaen/the Moorish land’s borders.⁹ Skin color, essentially, dissipates as a functional identity characteristic. Unlike Moriaen’s reception in Europe, the white-skinned knights are not received as “unusual” by the black-skinned inhabitants of the Moorish land; their skin color is not an issue. Even Agloval’s skin color is a non-issue, even though he will remain in the Moorish land, permanently, after the other Europeans leave. His marriage to Moriaen’s mother, moreover, *restores order*. With the arrival of the white European, all is well with our heroine and hero: Moriaen’s mother is named rightful queen of all the Moors, the political dissidents are removed (that is, slaughtered at the hands of the returning and restored rightful heir), and mother and son’s inheritance (and her dignity in the public eye, presumably) is restored.

The conclusion of this narrative, unlike moments in comparable contemporary narratives such as the *King of Tars* and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, is not about miscegenation: although Moriaen’s skin color is a detriment to his success in Europe, the black/white union is not in itself problematic, a fact that is reinforced by the non-mixture of Moriaen’s skin color and by the final resolution of reunion in the Moorish land. We might think of Agloval in the Moorish land as sticking out like a sore thumb, just as Moriaen stuck out in the European land, but herein lies an important point: unlike in Wolfram’s Feirefis or in other contemporary characters, the “whiteness” of the European father in Moriaen does not manifest itself. In Moor/European progeny of other East/West marriages, the child is half-white and half-black, and ultimately becomes all white, with the implication that the process has begun for the blackness (and the “black qualities” associated with it) to be “phased out”, but that does not happen to Moriaen. Moriaen’s black skin color is maintained unapologetically throughout: instead, blackness is incorporated into the romance and used as a kind of “prop” around which to develop and facilitate the narrative.

Moriaen’s mother, however, provides an important axis on which to consider the geographical placement of characters in this narrative. Moriaen’s mother is never

actually in Europe; her place, in no uncertain terms, is in the Moorish land. The few knights that do come face-to-face with her give no indication, as they did when they first met Moriaen in Europe, that she is “from the devil” or that she has any unusual “customs.” Moriaen’s mother is, in fact, presented with very recognizable (to Moriaen’s European audience) qualities: she is a princess, she fell in love and bore a child, she and her child were disinherited because the father was nowhere to be found, and she waits for and ultimately marries the father of her child. Moriaen, like his mother, is presented with “likeable” and, to the European, familiar circumstances. By presenting the foreign character with European-ish qualities, to borrow a formulation outlined by Jacqueline De Weever, the medieval poet allays his audience’s fears, controls its response, and lessens xenophobia by eliminating the character’s exotic qualities. The author of *Moriaen* gives the audience someone they can recognize, and who meets their expectations as an appropriate hero (DeWeever 529).

Moriaen is the only Moor to venture out from the Moorish land, and he returns there at the end of the narrative to stay, it is implied, permanently. All the Moors, then, are conveniently grouped and located together in the Moorish land. Agloval, on the other hand, is one of a cadre of Europeans, apparently, to venture into the Moorish land; he leaves, of course, but like Moriaen he too returns to the Moorish land at the end of the narrative to stay, it is implied, permanently. Thus the *Moriaen* effectively removes the anomaly of a black-skinned foreigner from its pages. It even removes Agloval, a valued knight of Arthur’s court, from a functional position as Arthurian knight, because of his association with members of the Moorish land. Even though the *Moriaen* treats the black-skinned foreigner with some compassion, he is ultimately shown the door, never, presumably, to return.

Cathy C. Darrup
Harvard University

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2 The *Romance of Moriaen* is contained in the medieval Dutch version of the *Lancelot*, where it occupies approximately five thousand lines and forms the conclusion of the first existing volume of the compilation. The romance is found nowhere else (Weston 7), and we do not know the exact date of the original poem, or the name of the author. The manuscript dates from approximately the beginning of the fourteenth century, although Bart Besamusca says the work is from the second half of the thirteenth century (Besamusca 395), and it compiles condensed versions of a number of Arthurian romances which in their original form were independent of each other. The compilation is comprised of the latter portion of the *Lancelot* proper, the *Queste*, and the *Morte d’Arthur*, the ordinary component parts of the prose Lancelot in its most fully developed form, a portion of a *Perceval* romance (based on the poem of Chrétien de Troyes), and a group of episodic romances (Weston 8).

3 Such issues are not especially new to a more Eastern audience. Bernard Lewis, for example, discusses "The Crows of the Arabs," a group of pre-Islamic Arabian poets who lament their "multicultural" position: Enemies revile me for the color of my skin, they say, but my whiteness overshadows my blackness. And the story of "The Black Knight" or Mu'allaqa of 'Antara is preserved as one of the orally-transmitted (in its original form) *Golden Odes* of the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian desert, ca. sixth century B. C. The Black Knight, "if the facts are authentic, was a mulatto son of an Arab prince and a Negro slave girl from Abyssinia. His 'inferior' blood kept his father from recognizing him as legitimate. In a fierce battle, his father ordered him to fight, but he refused, saying that it was not proper for a slave to fight. His father then freed him on the field, and he fought valorously" (Anderson, "The Black Knight," 8).

4 I am grateful to Kathy Biddick for the idea of this modification.

5 I am indebted to David Johnson for sharing his new translation of *The Romance of Moriaen* with me. All of the textual citations are from David F. Johnson and Geert H. M. Claassens, *Arthurian Archives: The Low Countries* (forthcoming).

6 The text is inconsistent regarding Camelot's besiegers: later in the romance, the Saxon element disappears.

7 I borrow this construction from bell hooks in her article in Thelma Golden's *Black Male*, 127 and 131.

8 Mercer and Julien, *Black Male*, 193.

9 I am grateful to Kathy Biddick for noting this construction.

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MURDERING THE NARRATOR OF THE WIFE'S LAMENT

The Old English poem *The Wife's Lament*, famously difficult to interpret, has elicited a number of conflicting readings, re-readings and interpretations.¹ Some scholars have kept strictly to the text, while others have allowed themselves more leeway in their interpretation.² The most commonly held view is that the poem is spoken by a woman, separated from her husband, who talks about her situation, past and present. A major question is the location of the narrator. What exactly is an *eorðscraef*, often translated as 'earthhole' or 'grave,' and what is the Wife doing in it? Why does she have to remain there?, Finding it difficult to understand why a woman would be living in a hole in the ground, in the middle