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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Skin in the Game? Legibility, Sovereignty, and Human Animals

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Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries. By Sarah Kay. The University of Chicago Press. 2017.

In the Skin of the Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France. By Peggy McCracken. The University of Chicago Press. 2017.

Writing on Skin in the Age of Chaucer. Edited by Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp. De Gruyter. 2018.

“And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.”
(Gen. 3:21)

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden wearing “garments of skins” marks one point of origin for claiming skin’s signifying capacities, but also for asserting human superiority over animals. As both Peggy McCracken’s and Sarah Kay’s recent books demonstrate, the clothing of Adam and Eve in animal skins, and the human-animal thinking of Genesis more broadly (Adam’s naming of the animals in Eden, the permission to use animals for food granted to humans after the Fall), support the broader symbolic use of skin in relations of sovereignty and dominion, and in biopolitics in medieval literature and culture. Both books take impetus from the “material turn” and the growth of critical animal studies, where thinking through the relation of humans and animals brings new scrutiny to and understandings of medieval texts and discourses, particularly their representations of human exceptionalism. These cognate studies make recourse to the work of Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2004) on sovereignty, biopolitics, and states of exception, with its implications not only for structures of human power over other humans but over all forms of life.

McCracken’s subject is what she terms “animality” rather than a study of animals, since she insists “on the human perspective” that imbues the texts—principally French vernacular romances, but also fables and vernacular bibles— she analyzes (9). In these texts, animal skins might be used to support and legitimize human authority over others, but they also point to human reliance on animals, and sometimes are made to give voice to forms of animal agency and resistance. Though Kay defines her interest instead in “humans and other animals,” she shares with McCracken an interest in the division between humanity and animality, in which animality is simultaneously included within and excluded from the human, as a space of exception. Grounded in readings of Latin and French vernacular bestiaries, Kay makes the claim that the parchment page “is the site of convergence ... between bare life and intellectual life, livestock and literacy, the history of the book and the seemingly ahistorical existence of nonhuman animals” (2). And while the book illuminates,

as McCracken's does, skin's implication with power in forms of authority and dominion, it also provides a sustained modelling of the processes entailed in reading skin, that is, of the power of skin, as bodily covering and as textual surface, in shaping and individuating the self, and distinguishing the human from as well as identifying it with other animals. In so doing, both McCracken and Kay are engaged with a mode of (re)reading, not only of medieval texts but also manuscript illustrations, that seeks to be profoundly ethical. And yet both hold off from explicitly engaging in other questions that this ethical mode might also invite, such as those of skin color or, relatedly, of early race thinking.

Sovereignty and Animality is concerned principally with animal skins that, though often detached from animals, usually remain recognizably *animal*: that is, with pelts and furs, worn on the body or into which humans might be sewn, for example. The power structures that such acts of animal appropriation seek to construct or reinforce rely in various ways on a *lack* of resemblance with human skin. Kay's *Animal Skins* instead gives central place to parchment—animal skins turned into reading and writing surfaces—from which, unlike pelts and furs, distinct animality has been purposefully stripped away. This facilitates, Kay argues, possible identification between human skin and parchment, but, paradoxically, might also allow for closer identification between humans and animals. Augustine's meditation on the means of man's salvation in the *Confessions* (13.15), in which the books of Nature and Scripture are imagined as skins "spread out like a canopy," provides the logical counterpart, key to Kay's analysis, to Adam and Eve's being clothed in animal skins as a consequence of the Fall: as Kay summarises, "aligned with the 'tunics of skin' which the first humans wore in Eden...the skins of scripture and the heavens are given...as marks of God's eternal authority and the divine plan to redeem them from their fallen state" (19). Redemption is thus construed by Augustine, in Kay's interpretation, as an act of reading, "which will envelope him in a new skin in exchange for his old one" (24). If the characterization of the heavens as parchment onto which the divine word is written might be made to support fantasies of skin's legibility, Augustine's discussion of (both human and animal) skin after the Fall, also makes the opposite claim: skin, covering over truth, now requires interpretation, and so is subject to possible misinterpretation.

Kay is finely attuned to this polysemy of skin, not least since *Animal Skins* makes bestiaries, which rely on allegorical interpretation, its main subject. And yet, curiously, nowhere does Kay make explicit Augustine's assertion in the *Confessions* that the firmament, spread out like a skin, is in fact covered by a cloud: alluding to 1 Corinthians 13.12, Augustine claims we now see "dimly, through the clouds, *like a confused reflection in the mirror* of the firmament" (13.15, original emphasis). In *Genesis Against the Manichees*, Augustine further draws out this allegorical dimness: because Adam and Eve abandoned truth and "sought the pleasure of lying," God "changed their bodies into this mortal flesh in which deceitful hearts are hidden" (2.21.32). Before the Fall, Augustine goes on to explain, interior thoughts could not be hidden by the body, whereas now, truth is hidden under garments of skin. In other words, as Virginia Langum (2013) has described, human skin, and language with it, darkens and becomes opaque, "opening the possibility for literary devices such as metaphor, while at the same time words become temporal and material" (141). Augustinian theology thus simultaneously proffers skin as legible *and* as obfuscated, as material and as linguistic.

An extension of Augustinian thinking, however, might further associate postlapsarian skin (like sin) with blackness in medieval contexts. In a sermon by Bernard of Clairvaux on the *Song of Songs*, to which Cord Whitaker (2019) draws attention, the metaphorical significance of the "garments of skin" with which Adam and Eve are clothed becomes, in Whitaker's terms, a black metaphor: "I recognize the image of our sin-blackened nature; I recognize the garments of skin that clothed our sinning first parents. He [Christ] even brought

this blackness on himself by assuming the condition of slave, and becoming *made like men are*” (cited in Whitaker 2019, 38). As I’ll go on to detail, Whitaker’s *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking*, among other recent publications on skin and color, demonstrates the pressing ways in which medieval skin studies, substantively advanced by Kay and McCracken under the aegis of the material and animal turns, needs also to turn to critical race studies.

The creation narrative establishes human rule over animals; as McCracken attends to in detail in chapter 1 of her study, Genesis also correlates human authority after the Fall with an ability to kill animals, to use them as food and to wear them as clothes, when God himself gives animal skins to Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness. Vernacular bibles and commentaries, as well as manuscript illustrations of this episode, reveal the interrelation of survival and dominion in medieval thought: the use of animals, McCracken argues, “is a technology of sovereignty that defines practical survival as inseparable from relations of dominion” (19). Fictional narratives share in and extend the theological grounds for sovereignty in striking ways. Romances, like *Le conte du papegau*, not only kill and flay animals and put their pelts to symbolic purposes (e.g., as an object of wonder to be put on display) to figure territorial sovereignty, but also, as in the *Roman d’Eneas*, function as tools to measure out land in order to assert dominion over it. Wearing animal skins similarly makes skin “the material, symbolic support for claims to sovereign power” (29). Manuscript illuminations of French sovereigns wearing the *houppelande*—the fur cloak measuring twelve or thirteen square meters and made from the pelts of 500 sables—are a case in point, illustrating the ways in which the use of animal skins is also biopolitical since it “calls on the power to regulate, administer, even produce life” (29). But if animal skin is a technology of sovereignty, human reliance on animals for survival destabilizes human claims to power. Some fictional narratives, such as the *Roman des romans*, in imagining “the reproaches of the animals” made into furs (30), suggest the superiority of animals since they “survive without wearing the skin of others” (32). In speaking for the animal, so too do such narratives call for engagement with the injustice of their death in the cause of “human vanity, human pride, and human life” (35).

The vernacular creation stories, miracle stories, and fables McCracken discusses in chapter 2 use representations of animals, and those of the wolf in particular, to “conceptualize social relations in terms of mutually agreed upon and mutually beneficial forms of governance” (38); the “animal perspective” these texts offer ultimately redefines sovereignty “as an elective, affective relationship” (67). Human animal encounters, McCracken argues, thus characterize the essentially contractual nature of sovereign relations in terms of intimacy, dependency, and love (38). Chapter 3 focuses on how sovereign relations defined more specifically “by protection and exile” encourage “a consideration of the shared being of the beast and the sovereign” (10). McCracken’s argument revolves around two romances, *Le chevalier au lion* and *Guillaume de Palerne*, in which skin is prominent in various ways: animal skin as armor and animal images as heraldic symbols in the *Chevalier*; animal skins as disguise and animal transformation in *Guillaume*. In both, McCracken claims, “disguise and recognition of human identity—and ultimately of sovereign status—are described in terms of animality.” Moreover, they “represent not just humans in the skin of an animal, but also the sovereign in the beast” (70). McCracken describes these romance representations as forms of “becoming-animal,” emphasizing, *pace* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), “becoming” as process. In *Guillaume*, both the animal skins—essentially, second skins—worn by the lovers in flight and the exiled werewolf Alfonso’s skin “position the protagonists in relation to structures of protection and exile that underscore a relationship between sovereignty and animality in which recognition is at stake” (85). The notions of exile and ban, exclusion and inclusion, return McCracken to the work of Agamben (1998).

Exemplifying “bare life,” the werewolf in this romance “is exiled from court, but it cannot be killed” (92). McCracken concludes that not only do sovereign power and bare life “meet in Guillaume’s order of protection for the exiled werewolf,” but “the outlaw and the sovereign converge in the figure of the young prince [one of the lovers in flight] who dons an animal skin to flee Rome and the emperor’s law.” The indistinction here between beast and sovereign thus “troubles the representation of sovereign authority,” questions human exceptionalism, and foregrounds the importance of recognition (93).

Chapter 4 deepens the book’s discussion of the role played by “choice and recognition” in self-sovereignty—that is (borrowing Patchen Markell’s definition), in “‘being an independent self-determining agent’” (97)—and its ramifications for gender. Returning first to Genesis and the temptation of Eve, this chapter focuses on snake women, particularly those of the *Roman de Mélusine* and *Bel inconnu*, to suggest sovereignty “comes under consideration ... through an emphasis on knowledge and choice articulated through representations of mirroring and recognition” (124): in these examples, “women are doubly distanced from authority and dominion ... and animality is what makes this distancing visible” (125). The final chapter takes up the abjection of animality: if animality characterizes female sovereignty as “monstrous or diabolical,” the romances McCracken analyses “cast animality as abject ... as the imprisonment of a human in the skin of a beast” (126). Tied to “becoming-human,” this chapter first explores the figure of the wild man, “an animal-like being whose humanity must be recuperated” (126) but in ways that unsettle the very oppositions between animality and humanity. In some texts the wild man’s sufficiency—he has no need of clothes, nor does he eat meat—“contradicts the notion that human survival requires the killing and flaying of animals” and “subverts the notion of a human sovereignty enacted and displayed in the use of animals” (128–29). Epic poems like *La naissance du chevalier au cygne* and *Tristan de Nanteuil* form the focus of the chapter’s closing discussion of the fourteenth-century “biopolitics of lineage” (played out in marriage, property law, etc.), in which McCracken finds “the cross-species bond of intimacy and loyalty shared by animals and humans in the forest posits an alternative model of social organization, troubling the security of dynasties grounded in part on the violent subjugation of animals to the needs, both material and symbolic, of humans” (156). Accounts of the *Bal des Ardents* and illustrations of it, which McCracken turns to in the book’s epilogue, witness historical instances of “becoming-bestial,” when the French king and five courtiers were sewn into cloth costumes as wild men in a courtly masquerade in 1393, which ended in tragedy when the costumes caught on fire. In these accounts, McCracken argues, not only is the sovereign’s authority challenged, but “the artifice of all sovereign claims that depend on human exceptionalism” is exposed (161).

In a book that thus foregrounds textual instances of the “becoming-animal” of humans, and of shared human and animal identity expressed, at times, through hybrid bodily forms, McCracken compellingly illuminates the ways in which animal skins support, display, and destabilize human dominion in medieval French courtly culture. She does so, distinctively, through focusing on historical, visual, and literary uses of skins that rely, very often, on the *persistence* of animal identity and so, as a result, can open up (visual, narrative) space for and give voice to an animal perspective or to animals themselves. McCracken rightly contends that such human-animal thinking also supports claims for human dominion over other humans. However, while the book offers fascinating readings of the gendered ways this plays out (e.g. in chapters 1 and 4), the focus on French romance and courtly culture necessarily leaves only partially answered what this looks like outside of the nobility (even chapter five’s wild men largely turn out to be noble) or (what is implicitly) the assumed whiteness of the cultural elite. McCracken’s discussion of Chrétien’s *Chevalier au lion* (chapter 3) does begin to draw out the ways in which this particular romance points to class

distinctions, and so how the power of nobility is asserted over non-noble subjects: “animal skins worn by knights are luxury garments that demonstrate their status and wealth; only peasants and those who live outside the court wear unprocessed hides” (70). This leads her to note, in passing, that “early in the romance, knights seeking adventure encounter a giant herdsman who guards wild bulls and wears their freshly flayed skins” (70), and, in a more extended treatment, to note Yvain’s encounter with the giant Harpin de la Montagne, whose “garb also marks his outsider status: he is clothed in a bear’s pelt” (71). The fight that ensues between Yvain and Harpin is illustrated in a thirteenth-century copy of the romance (Princeton Garrett 125, reproduced in the book as plate 6). McCracken’s close reading of this episode and the Garrett 125 image is lucid and persuasive, but, strangely, does not mention the contrast of Yvain’s creamy white complexion with the grey wash of Harpin’s skin; so too does she pass over the detail Chrétien gives of the giant herdsman’s appearance being “like a Moor” (Staines 1990, 260; “Uns vilains qui resambloit mor”, Hult 1994, l. 286). Small details though these are, these two examples suggest the possibility for medieval romance to bring into view the intersection of skin color with constructions, as well as disruptions, of the human-animal relationship and of racial and religious difference in this period. This broadened view might also help to challenge, not only “human exceptionalism,” but also “Western exceptionalism” (Heng 2018).

Also published in 2017, Kay’s *Animals Skins and the Reading Self* has a theoretical and conceptual richness that is the result of sustained engagement with skin over the last several decades, with a particular point of departure in a 2011 article (drawn on by McCracken and a number of other recent contributions to skin studies) on the “suture” between a reader’s skin and the skin of the text. Central to her analysis of bestiaries, which Kay suggests are particularly likely to encourage this doubling or feedback loop, is the potential resemblance of living human skin with the flayed animal skin of the book. Kay thus enquires into the page itself as much as the contents, asking how a “phenomenology” of the parchment book might interfere with the reading and meaning-making process of a bestiary. Didier Anzieu’s (1995a) influential notion of the Skin-Ego (“at once the literal skin around the human self, its fantasy container, and its metaphorical equivalent; for Anzieu all a person’s capacities for thought and expression...ultimately refer back to the infantile experience...of the self’s defining surface, the skin” [4]), is taken up by Kay (as others before her) to posit reading itself as a process that creates a “second skin.” Kay puts Anzieu’s account into conversation with Agamben’s (2004) of the “precarious character” of the division between humans and animals, a process she suggests parallels that of the individuation of child from mother, and in both of which skin is central (4). Agamben’s notion of the “anthropological machine,” which defines the labor required to demarcate human from animal, is taken up throughout the book. This machine produces, in Agamben’s terms, a “‘mobile caesura’ ... because its cut falls *within* the human.” In other words, it marks some human functions as “animal” (16). Kay thus aims “to expose the provisional nature of Agamben’s *inner* caesura between human and animal by setting it alongside the *outer* boundary (or skin) as construed by Anzieu, and conversely to expose the fantasmatic nature of the Skin Ego, by reading both in relation to the skin of the page.” Kay argues that both Anzieu’s inner boundary and Agamben’s caesura are destabilized “when identified with the skin of the page and thus also as ‘animal’.” If such destabilization is only temporary, *Animal Skins* works to suggest it leaves the possibility “of a human relationship to other animals that is not, at the same time, a severance from them” (17).

The book’s first chapter, like McCracken’s, starts out with the Genesis narrative of creation, in this instance as mediated by Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which the books of Nature and Scripture are aligned with Adam and Eve’s “tunics of skin.” Illuminating the resonance of Augustine’s theology with Anzieu’s psychoanalysis, Kay highlights the dual

significance of animal skins as signs of both human mortality and redemption. From this perspective, salvation is an act of reading that clothes the reader in a new skin. Adam's naming of the animals in the Genesis account registers further ground for claiming human exceptionalism. Taking up Agamben's (2004) articulation of the "space of exception," Kay, like McCracken, finds animals' significance in the creation narrative to lie in their simultaneous inclusion and exclusion: "if they are not part of the grand narrative of salvation, [animals] nevertheless define it by the fact of their exclusion," a principal that Kay extends to the role of animals in the bestiary tradition (25). Analyzing representations of Adam's naming of the animals, Kay suggests that recognition by the bestiary reader that parchment "represents 'human' skin in the case of Adam but 'animal' skin in the case of the animals and very likely *is* sheep skin in the case of the sheep," might also prompt a reader's recognition that "one of the reasons sheep are sacrificed is to produce books such as this" (39). Kay thus speculates where this potential interference produced by the manuscript matrix might lead—perhaps, as it does Kay, to acknowledgement of the ways animals are simultaneously included and excluded. *Animal Skins* thus seeks to illuminate the "contradictoriness" of the space of exception that operates in the human-animal relation, which "maps the incoherence of the caesura between humanity and animality but also reveals it as provisional and finite" (40).

Augustine's *Confessions* also opens up chapter 2's exploration of the association of skin as both clothing and writing surface. Skin for Augustine "designates both scripture and the heavens by which we are 'clothed'," as well as "the body in the state both of mortal sin and of immortal salvation" (41). This chapter thus asks how the second skin assumed in bestiary reading might lead a reader variously to an understanding of his or her mortal, animal identity or "to a sublime, perfected identity," stripped like parchment of fleshly impurities (42). The taking on of tunics of skin that mirrors their fall "from resemblance to dissimilitude from God" implies Adam and Eve's animalization; so too does it imply these tunics can be put on, but also taken off and replaced, in the way, for example, snakes do their skins. This parallels a broader principal of allegorical interpretation, central to the bestiaries, as a form of unwrapping: as *integumentum* or *involucrum* (43). Skin "represents the need to read through or beyond it in order to arrive at a spiritual reality"; the page as a skin likewise calls the reader to unwrap it to understand it (43–44). Reading might therefore direct the reader "back to fleshly investments," in a kind of doubling that recalls the anthropological machine, "since the 'skin of life' demarcates spiritual man from the carnal, animal one defined by the 'skin of death'" (44). Such unwrapping might thus further direct the reader not to a sublime sense of self but, through the "corporeal, animal quality of skin" (52), to a recognition of "kinship between human beings and other animals" (60).

Drawing on Anzieu's (1995b) fictional explication of the Skin Ego in a story imagining the library as a vagina, chapter 3 moves to a discussion of bodily orifices, common to both humans and other animals, associated not only with sex but also the senses. Kay suggests that "any suggestion of bodily orifices in the parchment can serve as a reminder of the reader's own" (67). The interconnection of orifices (parchment, animal, human) made possible in the bestiaries informs Kay's understanding of the model of *involucrum* as one "of the fold whose inner recesses cannot simply be 'unwrapped'." Folds occur where the surface turns inward, creating potentially illegible zones (67–68). Psychoanalysis would understand the association of human and animal sexual and sensory orifices as regressive; here the allegories' purpose, Kay argues, "by contrast, is to machine readers' disinvestment from the libido attached to these orifices so they can 'become human'" (69). Bestiaries, including the quality of the parchment they are made on, "might favor or resist the processes of 'human' progression versus 'animal' regression, and potentially affect female readers otherwise than male ones" (69).

Building on the argument that the “moral value of a body and the meaning of a text” (86) are made in relation to orifices in skin, chapter 4 explores how the vulnerability of skin to injury is part of its signification as bodily and textual surface. As the bestiary genre develops, Kay argues, interspecies violence is made increasingly visible, not just (as in the earlier tradition) animals’ self-immolation. This chapter develops ideas of sacrifice, rooted in the biblical story of Abraham and its principle of exchange, as well as in Agamben’s (1998) explanation of bare life. The *homo sacer*’s state of exception—as “bare life” that can be killed but not sacrificed—leads Agamben in *The Open* (2004) to thinking “about the relation between ‘humanity’ and ‘animality,’” as a process of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion (90). Animality is understood here, as it is by McCracken, as an instance of bare life. The role of violence both done to animals to make parchment and represented on parchment thus comes to the fore. Kay argues that the idea of sacrifice re-inflects the possible modes of identification between human and animal via parchment, installing “an arbitrary separation between the agent of violence and its object,” and so opening a “space of exception between the terms ‘human’ and ‘animal’” (91). The violence done to animals to create the parchment page hinges with scenes implicating readers in violence, turning that violence on humans, and so leading to uncertainty as to “who or what is being cut” (107).

The acts of recognition and misrecognition that bestiaries invite are the subject of chapter 5, which explores the question of “what constitutes ‘likeness’ and how it is discerned” (109). Bestiaries (like the Book of Nature) offer themselves (as per the Pauline notion) as mirrors and enigmas to be unraveled, highlighting “issues of similarity, difference, and their perception” (111). In reading, we are reliant first on sight and touch as the means through which recognition, via the text and the page, can occur. In other words, this process of recognition is interfered with by the “suture,” a feedback loop, between the contents of a text and material of the manuscript page (112). Recognition, Kay concludes, thus “typif[ies] the anthropological machine, since the divergence between *imago* and *similitudo* installs a caesura within the human; but the machine’s workings falter with the discovery of *similitudo* between all creatures and the divine” (127), a discovery registered foremost on the surface of skin (128).

The book’s final chapter considers the “inner life” or soul contained by skin, which bestiaries aim to cultivate, taking those of Hugh of Fouillooy and Richard de Fournival as core examples. Both, Kay argues, work through appeals to the senses (of sight, hearing, touch) to “provide their readers with a skin within which they ‘see’ what the book expounds and ‘feel’ the touch that it describes; reading acts, then, as a second skin in which the reader’s inner self is informed by the sight and touch of the page” (131). It is in this final chapter that Kay also more fully outlines the notion of the manuscript as a second skin, developing Martha Rust’s characterization of the manuscript matrix to include not just the reader’s “codicological consciousness” but unconsciousness as well, “in which reading can be subject to contingent interference from the look and feel of the page itself,” the “ultimate source” of which “lies in the primitive relation to the mother” (142). The manuscript matrix, in Kay’s explication of it, is another envelope, “one whose maternal origins” are forgotten, but now “a surface on which adult erotic feelings, or feelings of mortality are registered, or as a symbolic container within which knowledge and ideas are harbored” (143). Kay thus concludes that the bestiary reader “enters the envelope of the manuscript matrix,” where “his inner life takes shape through imaginatively dwelling on the contents of the page and through literally seeing and touching its surface” (148).

Animal Skins makes a significant contribution to skin studies in thinking through and modelling what the multiform processes of reading skin might be, and which constellate in the act of reading a book (and, in this case, a bestiary), in ways that persuasively posit medieval culture as a resource for contemporary critical and ethical thinking. The detailed

close readings Kay offers of the convergences between a text's content, its material vehicle, and the reader's skin can, by Kay's admission, only remain speculative, but nonetheless demonstrate the striking resonances between medieval natural philosophy, Christian allegory, and the medieval manuscript matrix, on the one hand, and contemporary psychoanalysis and biopolitical theory, on the other. But if *Animal Skins* makes clear the contribution medieval skin studies can make to critical animal studies and to understandings of manuscript culture, it remains largely silent, as does *Sovereignty and Animality*, on the important contribution it can make to histories of color and race. What happens to forms of recognition and resemblance, which both Kay and McCracken in various ways describe, when skin is a site of difference, or when it operates as a further space of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion? Kay's note of regret that her study has "not considered race or ethnicity among the possible attributes of readers" (151) might be taken as a quiet call for scholars to model again and anew the claims for the power of skin and its legibility. If so, it is a call that Whitaker's *Black Metaphors* answers.

Black Metaphors is the most recent in a series of significant publications (e.g., Heng 2018) on racism that challenge, and promise to redefine, the ways that we study the premodern periods. As the book's title clearly signals, Whitaker unpicks the history of a particular strand of modern racist thinking rooted in the opposition of black and white, and which is mapped onto other binaries such as sin and innocence, non-Christian and Christian, and so on. The book's chapters work to show how classical and medieval rhetoric and grammar establish a relationship of contrariety between black and white, which at the same time fundamentally relies on their interrelation, and, indeed, their unity. This relationship of contraries, under the influence of particular (related) forms of thought and language (such as metaphor, similitude, irony, antithesis, and the enthymeme—this last, "at the heart of the logics that animate race-thinking" [153]), eventually comes to be *exclusive*, giving a distorted view in which whiteness becomes the "unmarked norm" (3). "Blackness, whiteness, and racial difference," Whitaker powerfully demonstrates, are thus "mirages created through rhetoric"; what "starts out in material reality...quickly moves into the realms of imagination and interpretation."

Whitaker's book as a whole is instructive in how we might respond to the call implicit in Kay's note of regret; the opening chapter on *The King of Tars*, more particularly, is illustrative of how we might revisit and refine Kay's paradigm for the processes involved in reading parchment. *The King of Tars* is a romance that stages explicit questions about skin color and race, not least because just prior to his conversion, a Muslim Sultan's skin changes from black to white. Reading the Sultan compellingly as a *figura*, in whom "blackness and whiteness simultaneously cohere" (32), Whitaker unpacks the way *The King of Tars* "exploits the normativity of physical whiteness in western Christendom when it advocates the necessity of metaphorical, or spiritual 'blackness' in Christians" (20). As the book as a whole works to show, if metaphor is polysemous, blackness is a particularly flexible metaphor in medieval contexts, at times signifying "sameness and otherness, spiritual purity and sinfulness, salvation and damnation" (20), and one that is central to Christian self-improvement. In *The King of Tars*, moreover, the association of blackness and non-Christianity is not only made but also contradicted. Through the Sultan, Whitaker argues, "the medieval reader...is led to reflect upon his or her own spiritual state": "the white reader and the black sultan shift in and out of focus, changing places and shadowing one another, each is distorted by the other, shimmering like a mirage" (21).

In *Animal Skins*, a reader's identification with the parchment page is assumed to work in two directions: towards a recognition of one's animality, when the page is discolored, mottled, or marked with holes and apertures (58), or towards "a sublime, perfected identity in which, like the parchment, his skin might be purified of all vestiges of the flesh" (40). The

quality of the parchment itself, Kay argues, plays a key role in creating the feedback loop between page and reader. Compared with a bestiary in a Paris codex (BnF lat. 3630), for example, the Peterborough Bestiary (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 53), Kay writes, “is whiter, smoother, and altogether less redolent of the body,” and so “helps the reader envisage a prelapsarian man whose skin was not yet carnal or mortal” (48). How the reader views the manuscript page, Kay suggests, in turn may be “profoundly influence[d by] the way they perceive their own garment of flesh,” that is their own sinfulness or purity (60). Whitaker’s work allows us to see that within the binaries of human/animal that Kay identifies here is the shimmer of the black metaphor.

A further form of interference that we might bring to Kay’s explication of reading skin, then, is of the ways in which color operates in the possible forms of resemblance, recognition, or estrangement between a reader’s skin and that of the parchment page. It also seems incumbent that skin studies consider the ways manuscript culture and the parchment page itself might come to support the normativization of whiteness, to which *Black Metaphors* also points. In an unexpected turn to the *Miller’s Tale*, in which he traces Chaucer’s engagement with contrariety, Whitaker concludes: “Alisoun is in some ways a white page written over with expressive, overtly manufactured black brows and with coal-black silk embroidery. She is also the writing, the point from which meaning issues forth. In the face of the normativized whiteness and the obscured contrary relationship in modern racial ideology, the *Miller’s Tale’s* Alisoun, an unexpected black metaphor, reveals the racial mirage’s shimmer and reminds the reader that black is the point of the pen on the page” (88).

Another recent book, *Writing on Skin in the Age of Chaucer*, edited by Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp, focuses more particularly on *human* skin as a site of legibility. While the conception of human skin as a site of inscription, of course, borrows in part from the use of animal skins to make parchment, as this volume recognizes, the question of the human-animal relation is a more marginal interest to it. The volume’s one exception is provided by Pax Gutierrez-Neal, who, drawing on Kay’s (2011) explication of “suture,” argues (in line with both Kay and McCracken) that the conflation of human and animal identity in medieval romance, effected through wearing animal skins, can call into question what “separates... ‘self’ from the ‘other’” (188). The overlaying of human skin with animal skins, armor, and clothing in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *William of Palerne* results in an excess of symbols, “making identity vulnerable to misinterpretation.” More generally, however, *Writing on Skin* looks to illuminate the myriad ways in which human skin might be written on, marked, corrected, reshaped, and read “in the age of Chaucer.” Three overlapping paradigms in which human skin is “readable” are foregrounded: medical, in which skin is a symptom and a diagnostic tool; textual, in which human skin mirrors the parchment page; and social in which skin is shaped and fashioned through ritual and surgery.

Four essays foreground the medical and moral paradigms in which skin manifests interiority, a capacity materialized particularly powerfully (though not exclusively) in literary representations of leprosy. The medieval theory of *complexio*—which understands skin “as a screen,” making “legible the state of the patient’s invisible, internal body and soul” (58)—provides Michael Leahy with a lens through which to view Robert Henryson’s literary uses of leprosy in the *Testament of Cresseid*, while also situating Cressida’s fate in a wider epidermal milieu, to which Chaucer’s representation of Troilus’s lovesickness in *Troilus and Criseyde* also belongs. The potential equivalence between leprous skin marred by disease and the state of the soul is traced in Sealy Gilles’s, Sharon E. Rhodes’s, and Erin E. Sweeney’s contributions. If, as these essays show, leprous skin in medieval contexts offers itself up to be read, precisely *what* can be read on the skin remains multivalent and ambiguous. The pervasive ambiguity of skin’s meanings, as Gilles and Sweeney suggest, does not preclude marked or damaged skin from nonetheless figuring or refiguring the relation of the individual

to the community. Gilles argues, also turning to the *Testament*, the association of leprosy with heresy colors Henryson's representation of Cressida, her marred skin figuring her "simultaneous containment and excision"—from society and from the narrative itself (49–50). Similarly, Sweeney asserts that the Cook's skin in *The Canterbury Tales*—itchy, pale, and afflicted with a "mormal" (a kind of ulcer), all symptoms suggestive of leprosy—speaks to the ambiguity of his place within the pilgrim group: the Cook's damaged skin unsettles his relation to the community, destabilizes his identity, and creates an openness within it.

Skin's capacity to materialize the interior, or the self, as literalized in medieval manuscript culture forms the focus of a further set of the volume's essays. Chaucer's poem, *Adam Scriveyn*, famously concretizes the ways in which writing on parchment invites and underscores thinking about human skin as an inscribable surface. The rubbing, scraping, and writing over of textual errors that this poem imagines invokes the notion of the palimpsest, which Catherine C. Cox uses as a starting point for exploring the ways Chaucer's "self-reflexive representations of skin germane to textuality correspond thematically to representations of skin as corporeal texts, potentially signifying the character and composition of the humans bearing it" (99–100). The notion of the palimpsest enables Cox to go further in thinking through the familiar observation that skin manifests character (as evidenced by the Cook, the Summoner, and the Wife of Bath), since it also entails the possibility of correction, renewal, and even healing, while leaving "a visible, perceptibly tangible" trace of characters' errors (108). The parallel between human skin and parchment also grounds the discussion of hue—"skin tone"—in Nicole Nyffenegger's essay on *Troilus and Criseyde*, which argues that faces within the narrative are conceived of as inscribable spaces. The relationship between marked human skin in narrative and the parchment page is one Nyffenegger understands in terms of "simple duplication": "a narrative sequence that describes marked human skin is connected, by similarity, to the parchment page on which it is inscribed" (147). Faces in *Troilus* are "*mise en abyme* pages": the parchment mirrors human skin, and graphic marks, illumination, and rubrication mirror skin hue.

Essays by Roberta Magnani and M. W. Bychowski, along with Gutierrez-Neal, draw out the violence entailed in making skin legible and in policing skin, to take up Magnani's terms, "as a hermeneutic surface" (195). Paralleling the function of marginal glosses in manuscripts of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* with the place of glossing within the Wife's *Prologue* itself, and paralleling the violent means through which gender is inscribed on the Wife's body with the act of scraping parchment, Magnani attends to "glossing as a technology of cutaneous inscription" (202). The marginal gloss on the lines 152–55 of the Wife's *Tale*, where Alison invokes the theme of marital debt, asserts "He who has a wife is regarded as debtor, and is said to be uncircumcised, to be the servant to his wife." The gloss, recalling the Jewish ritual of circumcision in its Christian refiguring by St Paul, seeks to separate out masculinity and femininity, and Christianity from Judaism, and so to "straighten" Alison. The Wife's resistance to these technologies of inscription and their "'straight' hermeneutics," as well as the instability of the gloss aimed at surveillance and coercion (212), Magnani argues, foregrounds the capacity of medieval skin to signify queerly.

Bychowski takes up Judith Butler's description of "sharp machines"—"the network of physical and social operations at work in transitioning bodies (i.e. trans bodies) from one gender designation to another" (222)—to reread Fragment VI and the gender identity of the Pardoner. Like Sweeney, Bychowski emphasizes skin's role as "the organ where the world meets the body physically but also the plane on which society and the self struggle over" its significance (224). Highlighting the ways that both Virginia's pre-sexual identity is connected with her skin and preserved in her decapitation, and the Pardoner's indeterminate gender is founded in the appearance of his skin and inferred castration, Bychowski seeks to

situate transsexuality in a longer history of “sharp machines” and skin operations. Skin, here, as for Magnani, “is not a blank background on which gender is inscribed but it is remade by language and even resists the inscription of certain genders” (231).

Though *Writing Skin* generally explores familiar paradigms—skin is legible, but polysemous; skin is a surface both registering and hiding interiority, emotion, and sin; skin shapes identity, and so on—within a strangely narrow set of texts (Chaucer’s Summoner, Cook, and the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales*; the short poem *Adam Scriveyn*; and Henryson’s *Testament*, for example, dominate in discussions), it nonetheless draws out some valuable nuances. Not least of these, as Elizabeth Roberston notes in the Afterword, are the multiform ways skin “repeatedly destabilizes binary categories and identities. Its destabilizing features allow it the potential not only to challenge, but also to articulate new identities including queer and transgendered ones” (252). Different though Nyffenegger’s and Rupp’s collection is from Kay’s and McCracken’s studies, a striking consensus on skin in medieval literature and culture is reached across them: as both material and symbol, skin has the power to simultaneously include as well as exclude, and to become a space of exception. As Robertson observes, skin mediates between inside and outside, animal and human, life and death: “as an entity whose fundamental function is to mediate, skin is abject: neither inside or outside, subject or object, the skin occupies a place in the middle, between subject and object, the abject position” (252).

This insight notwithstanding, it is also striking that in this collection too there is a notable absence of discussions of skin color (with the exception of Nyffenegger’s contribution), and a reticence to foreground questions of race or of religious difference (although Magnani’s essay does raise Jewish/Christian distinctions). And yet even Chaucer’s work, a central focus for the volume, registers the brown skin of a peasant laborer (*The Cook’s Tale*), the black skin of the devil (*Friar’s Tale*), the pale face and black brows of the old carpenter’s young wife, Alisoun (*Miller’s Tale*), as well as, pointedly, the whiteness of Custance, a Christian princess (*Man of Law’s Tale*). Implicitly at stake in *Writing on Skin* too, then, is the politics of recognition—both that at work in medieval literature as well as in modern scholarship on it. On this, Whitaker’s *Black Metaphors* is again eloquent and illuminating. Whitaker observes of Alisoun’s blackness and whiteness that it “is not like those instances that use clear-cut examples to inspire interior Christian purity. While retaining spiritual implications, Alisoun’s depiction points towards something less starkly delineated than purity and impurity, savedness and damnedness, Christianness and non-Christianness. It is more subtle than Bernard’s black brows and white skin that put one another in stark relief.” In the example of Alisoun, then, Whitaker hears “a call for a nuanced interpreting process that registers blackness as an epistemic tool fundamental to the production of meaning” (84). Medieval skin studies, these recent publications together suggest, has a continued role to play in answering that call.

Notes on contributor

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