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Coles, Kimberly Anne. Bad Humor: Race and Religious Essentialism in Early Modern England

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Coles, Kimberly Anne.
Bad Humor: Race and Religious Essentialism in Early Modern England.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. Pp. xiv, 203. ISBN 9780812253733 (hardcover) US$65.

Bad Humor: Race and Religious Essentialism in Early Modern England is a work of literary criticism that interprets select early modern English sonnets, masques, epic poems, and stage plays through the lens of early modern medical and theological theories of the body to consider the racialization of human phenotypical differences as an English colonial strategy. The author, Kimberly Anne Coles, states that "race is a strategy" for essentializing and manipulating interpretations of bodily differences (xiv). According to Coles, the strategy of race was deployed across early modern England via literary works that hinged on both medical theories and reformed English Protestantism. Thus, disentangling the literary texts unravels the embedded "racial logic" (10).

Coles argues that natural philosophy and medical theory buttressed ideas of the hereditary transmission of the Christian faith through blood. Within this physiological-religious system, the Black melancholic humoral complexion was interpreted as denoting the "wrong religion" and "paganism past reform" within the body and, increasingly, through a person's appearance and skin colour (2). In the author's words: "This is, in fact, the period when moral encoding of skin color is under construction" (4). In short, Coles contends that early modern England witnessed the emergence of a taxonomy of Christians in Black and white and the construction of white supremacy, premised upon notions of inferior and superior religious constitutions readable on a body's surface (117). As primary sources, Coles gathers literary works ranging from Edmund Spencer's *The Faerie Queen* (1590) and William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1601/2) to John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* (1633) and Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko: A Tragedy* (1695). The sources are read through a token selection of English, Italian, and German early modern appropriations of Galenic medicine, including Marsilio Ficino's *Platonic Theology* (1482) and Philip Melanchthon's *Commentarius de anima* (1542), without problematizing one of the volume's leading claims stating that early modern English colonial strategies were unique in their racializing discourse and operated in opposition to Catholic bodies and foreign geographies.

Bad Humor comprises five chapters, a preface, an introduction, and a short coda. The preface intimately acknowledges the author's familial motives for the project. The introduction outlines the volume's questions, sources, ambitions, and structure. The first three chapters are divided into two parts that juxtapose texts by Catholic converts in England with "racial scripts" that deliberately crafted racial constructions. Coles assembles this juxtaposition on the uncertain premise that "Catholic converts […] as potential targets of this discourse are less likely to deploy its terms in the service of a racial episteme" (13). For example, in chapter 1, Coles juxtaposes Donne's letters and *Holy Sonnets* with Christopher Brooke's *Poem in the Late Massacre in Virginia* (1622). The premise for the juxtaposition is that Donne "lacks the agenda that activates the production of race" (21), while Brooke's poem is an explicit "racial script" (43). Contrasting the two, Coles argues, unravels how the colonial political agenda instrumentalized ideas from the cultural mainstream, including the medical and religious theories. However, given that the perpetuation of racializing discourses and practices also occurred insidiously and unintentionally and that racial episteme, to use Coles's words, has, at times, been performed and embodied by the "targets of this discourse," the chapter's structure is brought into question. In other words, the cultural versus political divide is problematic and redundant. Even so, in both parts of chapter 1, Coles compellingly questions how religion was cast in somatic terms to sanction English geopolitical affiliations. Chapter 2, titled "Bad Faith," compares Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) and Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621) to show how religious others' melancholic bodies were imagined as deflecting divine love and rightful Christian charity. Building upon chapter 2, chapter 3 examines religious differences as features of the blood and skin and deconstructs the specific ways melancholic bodies were alleged to "naturally" repel divine love.

The author's analyses coalesce in chapter 4, "Soule Is Forme," which tackles Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* in reference to early modern racecraft (88). Coles anatomizes Maleger's "cold and dry humoral condition" (90) through Calvinist Timothy Bright's tract, *Treatise of melancholie* (1586), to demonstrate the Protestant framing of the physiological disposition to melancholy as irreparable. The final chapter, "Moral Husbandry," takes on Shakespeare's *Othello* and Southerne's *Oroonoko: A Tragedy* and deduces that "the separation of free and enslaved people based upon chromatic distinction" (131) originated in early modern England in favour of the "New World economy" (139).

Coles concludes the volume with a short coda that brings the analyses to the present. The author maintains that the meanings attached to "black skin in the modern United States […] are derived from its racist history" that traces back to early modern colonial England (141). Undeniably, race is a cultural, political, and historical construct with a direct material bearing on things, artifacts, and feeling bodies. However, the coda brings me to my last point concerning Coles's framing of historical chronologies more broadly. In the book's introduction, the author describes *Bad Humor* as "a history of black and white" (1) that marks the moment in which fictions of race were affixed to skin colour around a "pseudoscientific racial logic" (5). However, the temporal fixing of a historical origin when skin colour and phenotypical differences became essentially racialized is inconsistent with Coles's claim that the history of race is "not an evolutionary tale" (19). The author's juxtaposition of "pseudoscientific" versus "scientific" additionally increases the tension between the desire to build upon scholars such as Urvashi Chakravarty and Ayanna Thompson (editors of "Race and Periodization," special issue, *New Literary History* 52, no. 3–4 [Summer/Autumn, 2021]) who scrutinize the racial politics of periodization as non-linear and non-teleological and Bad Humor's desire to set up a more conventional origin story. Nevertheless, Bad Humor is timely and certainly significant in bringing the history of medicine to the study of early modern English literature. Coles should also be commended for generously referencing current and imperative premodern Critical Race Studies scholarship. To conclude, Bad Humor would interest historians of race, critical race scholars, and literary scholars studying early modern England and its extensive colonial violence.

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