
Scholarly interest in the body and its textual representations has produced a wide variety of approaches to physical difference in the humanities and social sciences. In particular, recent interdisciplinary research has brought together two distinct fields, medieval studies and disability studies, producing new insights into the ways in which historical cultures shaped social responses to bodies that appeared or were discursively determined to be “different.”

The origins of the short history of disability studies in the Middle Ages may perhaps be traced to Edward Wheatley’s 2002 article, “Blindness, Discipline, and Reward: Louis the Ninth and the Foundation of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts,” in which Wheatley analyzed the discursive tradition that led to the construction of the social identities of the blind residents of this medieval French hospital. Wheatley concluded that the medieval church controlled the discourse of illness and disability in ways that marked “the blind” as “vile,” their bodies the visible indications of the divine propensity for punishing sin with physical impairment. Moreover, Wheatley famously posited a new paradigm for pre-modern constructions of disability, the “religious model,” arguing that religion played the same regulatory role in medieval society that science and medicine have played in the modern world. In her influential 2006 book, Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, ca. 1100-1400, Irina Metzler took a more theoretical approach in her analysis of medieval physical difference, wrestling with the categories of “impairment” and “disability” in late medieval hagiography and grounding her study of physical difference in the “social model” of disability that prioritizes a rigorous definition and separation of these terms.

The work of Wheatley and Metzler figures prominently in a new collection of essays entitled Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations, edited by Joshua Eyler of
Columbus State University. Although each of the essays grapples with the models proposed by Wheatley and Metzler, what is particularly impressive about this volume is the wide array of interdisciplinary methodologies and historical sources that it presents. By offering such a diverse range of approaches and source texts, the book succeeds in considering disability from a number of related historical perspectives. Contributing authors contend with both the “religious” and “social” models of disability as they apply to specific texts from a variety of European medieval contexts. In addition, an innovative engagement with other theorists from modern disability studies is woven throughout; in particular, references to the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, Sharon Snyder, and David Mitchell make frequent appearances throughout the collected essays.

In his Introduction, Eyler states that the purpose of the book is to “contribute to, and—in some important ways—to begin, a new conversation about the realities and the theoretical dimensions of disability in the Middle Ages” (2), although at times this volume of essays reads less like a conversation than like the conference proceedings of a congenial panel of very capable medievalists. Each chapter is styled as its own academic presentation, aimed more often than not at a group of specialists: the individual authors never interact with one another, nor do they take up similar theoretical starting points. This is both a strength and a weakness, for inasmuch as the volume represents exciting possibilities for the application of different theories of disability to diverse historical genres, it suffers from a lack of mutual exchange.

Above all, this anthology makes a convincing case for the study of disability in the Middle Ages as a discrete sub-category of inquiry by arguing for the necessity of understanding the processes of social marginalization and social constructions of physical difference in their historical contexts. While Eyler admits that the cultural model for disability currently represents the “best approach” to medieval sources, each of the essays he includes in his volume struggle with the terms “disability” and “impairment” in different ways.

Although Eyler proposes that the book “should not be construed as a comprehensive survey” of medieval disability studies, the volume nevertheless makes important strides in defining key questions for the field. On this account, the essays in the first section of the book, collected under the somewhat ambiguous heading of “Reconsiderations,” demonstrate particular insight. Of particular value are the essays by Julie Singer (“Playing by Ear: Compensation, Reclamation, and Prosthesis in Fourteenth-Century Song,” chapter 3), Scott Wells (“The Exemplary Blindness of Francis of Assisi,” chapter 5), Beth Tovey (“Kingly Impairments in Anglo-Saxon Literature: God’s Curse and God’s Blessing,” chapter 10), and John P. Sexton (“Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas,” chapter 11). These essays account for the complicated ways in which the physical and sensory impairments that modern theory would term “disabilities” were viewed differently, and often in very particular and nuanced ways, by medieval writers, readers, and audiences.

Singer in particular recognizes the need for a “working critical vocabulary for disability studies in the Middle Ages” (52), and she makes a convincing argument that although the blindness of
the Florentine musical virtuoso Francesco Landini might be understood as a physical impairment, it nevertheless avoids easy classification as a socially-constructed disability. Similarly, Wells demonstrates how the social processes of marginalization or constraint usually expected by the modern social model of disability were not operative in regard to the exemplary and idealized blindness of Francis of Assisi, whose remarkable piety inscribed new meaning onto the textual representation of impairment. This points up the limits inherent in the social model of disability when it is applied specifically to medieval texts, and Tovey’s article further underscores this fact by showing how illness functions within Old English texts as a multi-valent source of spiritual meaning rather than an automatic signifier of physical or moral weakness. Sexton masterfully argues that physical difference in Icelandic sagas resists the social model of disability inasmuch as the conventions of Icelandic naming practices show a “sophisticated” reading of bodies on both individual and communal levels of interpretation.

Yet even here, each scholar’s understanding of disability is entirely contingent upon his or her primary source material. The fact that these contributing authors differ with each other as to the very definition of disability serves to draw attention to the overall lack of theoretical cohesiveness that permeates the volume. The collection could have avoided this tendency by including a separate section of “respondents” —that is, two or three essays that directly responded to the general trends or questions raised throughout. For example, although Eyler himself proposes the use of the “cultural model” for understanding disability, a model that supersedes the medical, religious, and social models by removing the word “impairment” from the discussion altogether and thinking of disability in the Middle Ages as “something that is constructed by both bodily difference and social perception at the same time” (8), very few of the contributing authors take up this “cultural model,” due, Eyler concedes, to the authors’ “effort to construct a model for understanding medieval disabilities based on the evidence of our sources rather than applying a pre-fabricated model backward” (8). The first section of the volume, then, is remarkable for its methodological and epistemological diversity but might have benefitted from a more structured and consistent interaction with the available models.

The second portion of the book, “Reverberations,” comprises three essays that each takes up a methodology more heavily influenced by modern theories of disability, although here the results are far less successful than those collected under “Reconsiderations.” Andrew Higl’s essay, “Henryson’s Textual and Narrative Prosthesis onto Chaucer’s Corpus: Cresseid’s Leoproxy and Her Schort Conclusioun” (chapter 12), attempts to posit a new theory of “textual prosthesis” but fails to satisfactorily enunciate the precise differences between this dynamic and Mitchell and Snyder’s established concept of “narrative prosthesis.” Similarly, although Abigail Elizabeth Comber evaluates Shakespeare’s characterization of Richard III in lieu of the religious, social, and political constructions of disability in the later Middle Ages (chapter 13), she glides too quickly over the process that she terms “the Christianization of disability.” Because of this, her efforts at a thorough contextualization fall a bit short. Encarnación Juárez-Almendros’ fascinating discussion of aging
women in early modern Spanish literature (chapter 14) draws on such a wide variety of theoretical positions to explain the narrative treatment of gender—from the psycho-linguistic work of Lacan to the work of disability historian and theorist Lennard Davis—that her historical-literary case studies almost become lost in the mix. An additional essay that addresses the strengths of these three essays by elevating their common concerns would do justice to the courage and innovation that each of these authors clearly demonstrates.

Such minor criticism should in no way obscure the fact that this collection is a groundbreaking contribution to new scholarship at the intersection of disability studies and medieval studies—not only because it presents such a variety of perspectives but because the very diversity of the contributions argue effectively for the merits of medieval disability studies as a legitimate discipline. Scholars and students of religious history, disability studies, cultural studies, and literature will find many worthy companions to “think with” in this collection, and medievalists of all stripes will find the interdisciplinary nature of the essays particularly stimulating. Eyler has done his field a great service in bringing together so many thought-provoking perspectives under one roof.

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