Editor's Introduction

Disability and the social body

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Social oppression may be the only thing the disabled have in common ...
Susan Wendell, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability'

The notion that people with disabilities must have *something* in common has lain at the heart of Disability Studies since its beginnings, in the 1980s, as an interdisciplinary scholarly approach with a decidedly activist bent.¹ Unfashionable though the label 'identity politics' has become (at least in some circles), it is precisely on the formulation of a disabled identity – an identity that, like gender, may be seen as reflecting a societal construct projected from an organic, bodily difference – that literary and historical scholarship on disability has largely hinged. Whether it be bodily condition, medical curiosity, or exclusion or oppression, there must be a *something* that permits the constitution of 'people with disabilities' as a social category. This fundamental and seemingly simple notion has posed no small difficulty to scholars of medieval disability, however. The absence of premodern catch-all terms articulating an equivalent to the modern concept of 'disability' (in scholarly and vernacular tongues alike) is but the most apparent sign of the inadequacy of contemporary Disability Studies, its methods and its terminologies, to capture the social experiences of medieval people who manifested the physical or mental symptoms of conditions that would today identify them as

1 See Lennard Davis (2006) for an introduction to the origins and development of Disability Studies.

- 2 On the absence of an 'umbrella term' for disability, see Metzler (2006, 5). Henceforth I will bracket 'disability' within quotation marks to signal that its application to the Middle Ages is problematic at best, while still employing the term for convenience's sake.
- 3 For a brief review of medieval disability studies through 2009, see Singer (2010a). Major essay collections and monographs on medieval disability published since that article's preparation include Eyler (2010), Pearman (2010), Singer (2011), Turner (2010), and Wheatley (2010).
- 4 I am rather partial to the paradigm proposed in Singer (2010b).

'disabled.'² Indeed, with a few specific and noteworthy exceptions, such as residential hospitals for the blind, there is little medieval evidence of anything resembling a modern notion of disabled community or disabled identity.

These observations regarding the difficulties of appropriating a Disability Studies approach to the study of the medieval period are hardly novel. For more than a decade, medievalists have wrestled with the disciplinary apparatus of Disability Studies, working to refine its sometimes blunt critical instruments and develop variants flexible enough to account for 'disabled' medieval bodies.³ Much of this methodological discussion has thus far centered on *models* of disability and their applicability to the texts and cultures of medieval Europe. From scholarship on contemporary disability, medievalists have borrowed the *medical model*, according to which disability is constructed as a disadvantageous condition that may be mitigated or 'normalized' through medical intervention, and the *social model*, which distinguishes between corporeal difference (impairment) and the socially constructed obstacles that result from that difference (disability) – though we should note that medievalists have tended to quickly discard the medical model (or disregard it altogether), whereas a great many have embraced the social model. In response to these paradigms, developed with specific reference to modern constructs of disability, Edward Wheatley has proposed a *religious model* that serves, in effect, as a more appropriately 'medieval' variant of the medical model (Wheatley, 2010, 10–19). More recently, a *cultural model* has been proposed in response to the social model's often reductive binarity; hardly a model at all, this approach might best be described as a common-sense reminder that the social marginalization of the disabled subject cannot so easily be untangled from his/her corporeal condition (Mitchell and Snyder, 2006). Yet more 'models' continue to crop up from time to time.⁴ Still, it is the social model's fundamental dichotomy between impairment and disability, between physiological difference and social construct, that has thus far made the most lasting mark on medieval Disability Studies. The focus on impairment and disability has led Irina Metzler, and others after her, to argue that 'there were no "disabled" people in the Middle Ages, only impaired people' (Metzler, 2006, 9). If this is the case, can medieval Disability Studies even exist?

New Directions in Medieval Disability Studies

The recent history of medieval Disability Studies shows that, for the most part, contemporary models of disability yield categories and identities that do not appear to correspond to medieval social realities. As the above discussion indicates, one response to this analytical predicament has been to develop new models of (medieval) disability. I intuit, however – and the essays composing this themed cluster bear witness – that the *future* of medieval disability studies lies elsewhere. In the introduction to *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations*

and *Reverberations*, Joshua R. Eyler quite rightly indicates that the social model of disability, even the cultural model, is insufficiently flexible to account for the multivalent representations and appropriations of disability in medieval literary discourses: 'Rather than constructing a single, and therefore limited, definition of these terms [impairment and disability], it may benefit our field more if we remove the term "impairment" from the discussion altogether and think of disability in the Middle Ages as something that is constructed by both bodily difference and social perception at the same time' (Eyler, 2010, 8). I agree that an inordinate focus on models has begun to stifle the development of more innovative approaches to medieval disability, and I'd like to press this point even further.

A modest proposal for medieval disability scholars: let's indeed take the distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability' off the table, and while we're at it, let's worry less about defining 'disability,' too. Let's complement the abundant studies concerned with the manners in which society at large might create 'disabled' outgroups (medicalization, oppression, and so on) in favor of an inquiry into the transformative effects that 'disabled' bodies might operate on other categories of social identity. We must consider not only that disability is constructed by bodily difference and by social perception, but also that *disability itself* – whatever that is! – (re)constitutes and (re)configures other, contiguous social categories. What will happen, for instance, if we think of the medieval 'disabled' not as a marginalized group, but as individuals (or groups of individuals sharing certain physical/mental characteristics) endowed with a unique capacity to redraw boundaries between margins and center? Disabled bodies manifest a particular potential to perturb existing social categories in the largely non-exclusionary, pre-institutionalization, pre-nursing home Middle Ages, where the much-vaunted (apparent) lack of a notion of 'disabled' identity renders a broader swath of social boundaries permeable to the non-normative body. In other words, medievalists are perhaps the scholars *best* situated to escape the reductive binaries dominating contemporary disability studies, to trouble these notions through new critical conceptions of disability and community.

The essays collected in this volume map out four such lines of inquiry into medieval disability, moving beyond questions of exclusion, and of disabled identity, in order to resituate medieval people with disabilities within a vaster network of social experiences than most studies of medieval disability have imagined. They do so from a number of disciplinary perspectives: literary studies, history, musicology. In 'How to Kiss a Leper,' Julie Orlemanski considers the literal interface of saintly and diseased flesh: a frequent sign of devotion and humility in holy lives, especially in those reflecting Franciscan influence. Andia Augustin's 'The Disabled Body in the Fabliaux' demonstrates that in a number of French comical texts staging encounters between 'disabled' and able-bodied people, it is not the 'abnormal' bodily condition itself, but

rather *knowledge* of the authenticity of that condition, that permits the reversals of power that are characteristic of the genre's humor. Kristina Richardson presents the varied ways in which 'disabled' bodies participated in the constitution of relationships (between lovers, colleagues, or friends) in a very different cultural context with 'Drug Overdose, Disability and Male Friendship in Fifteenth-Century Mamluk Cairo.' And in "'That suck'd the honey of his music vows': Disability Studies in Early Modern Musicological Research,' Samantha Bassler illustrates the use of 'music itself and the material culture of music (scores, song, poetry, and writings about music) as images of disabled bodies' through a reconsideration of women's 'mad songs' in *Othello* and *Hamlet*.

These essays demonstrate how, in a variety of cultural contexts from the thirteenth-century French bourgeoisie to the early modern English stage, from hagiographic writings in Italy or England to literary coteries of fifteenth-century Cairo, conditions that we would call 'disabilities' bring about unexpected social convergences and new definitions of individual and (especially) community identity. Like the cultural milieus in which they are here studied, these conditions cover a broad range of human experiences: disfiguring disease, blindness, hunched back, physical and psychological aftereffects of drug abuse, madness, blue eyes, female baldness, and even an extraordinarily long butt crack. The spectrum of bodily difference presented here is striking, and so, too, are the sometimes surprising realignments of social categories and values that this difference enables. We are forced to revisit, as Julie Orlemanski puts it, 'commonsense assumptions' about beauty and attraction; masculinity and femininity; the acts that build complicity, affiliation, and identity, and the bodies that may perform them. The 'disabled' are positioned sometimes at the margins, sometimes at the center of these ever-shifting community configurations.

Enabling Identities

Do the Middle Ages offer an iteration of the 'other world,' evoked as somewhat of a theoretical fantasy in Robert McRuer's and Abby L. Wilkerson's influential *GLQ* issue *Desiring Disability*, 'in which an incredible variety of bodies and minds are valued and identities are shaped, where crips and queers have effectively ... displaced the able-bodied/disabled binary' (McRuer and Wilkerson, 2003, 14)? Norms governing that which is considered beautiful or desirable are, indeed, among the first 'commonsense assumptions' to disintegrate upon the de-marginalization of the medieval 'disabled.' And so each of our four essays revisits, in its own way, McRuer's and Wilkerson's observation that one way of breaking free of binary conceptions is through a sort of desire that displaces boundaries between the beautiful and the deformed. The language of 'desiring disability' is most explicitly revisited by Julie Orlemanski. In holy lives staging the leprous kiss, she notes, disgust itself is

constructed as a form of attraction, 'defamiliarizing the face-to-face encounter and inciting new perceptual and intersubjective possibilities.' A kiss is an expression of desire (for another person, for a state of grace) that challenges lines of demarcation between the devout do-gooder and the disfigured leper. Desire manifests a similar capacity to dissolve normative boundaries in the medieval Arabic verse Kristina Richardson presents in her article. These often homoerotic poems explicitly address the desirable disabled, 'realigning beauty norms,' Richardson explains, and 'allowing one to find beauty among the "ruins."' Similar questions underlie Samantha Bassler's analysis of the role 'mad songs' play in the marginalization or alienation of Ophelia and Desdemona: while Shakespearean plays have inspired other Disability Studies readings (such as Mitchell and Snyder's remarks on *Richard III* in Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, 95–117), Bassler's is innovative in drawing on gender studies and musicological perspectives to offer a new reading of the Bard's desirable 'disabled' women. Notions of beauty and desire underpin Andia Augustin's reading of fabliaux, too – a genre typically read as a celebration of the normative, youthful (and sexual) body. Her revelation of non-normative bodies' participation in networks of pleasure indicates that 'disability' is not always a marginalizing condition, and on the contrary, such conditions often empower the 'disabled' person *or* those who know how to manipulate other people's perceptions of 'disability.' Like the others, this essay demonstrates how expanded notions of beauty and desire offer the medieval 'disabled' a new voice.

Rewriting the rules of attraction also means reconfiguring relationships between 'disability' and gender. The manner in which these categories are negotiated in the texts discussed in this volume appears to reveal a significant rupture between medieval and early modern cultures. 'Disability' is largely gender-neutral in the holy lives, the fabliaux, and the poems discussed in the first three essays: both men and women can be 'disabled,' and 'disabled' men and women can be desired. The simultaneous disabling and empowerment of *Berengier au long cul*, the hero(ine) of the eponymous fabliau, underlines the tricky dynamics of power and bodily (de)form(ity) in especially playful fashion: an able-bodied woman, mistaken by her husband for a deformed man, derives enormous domestic power from her spouse's misapprehension. What would seem to 'disable' the wife, in this case, is another person's perception – one ignorant man's opinion providing a lighthearted vulgarization of Aristotelian notions of woman as inverted or inferior man.⁵ Yet this perception is not disabling at all (in the terms of contemporary Disability Studies), in the sense that it does not exclude or marginalize the woman; on the contrary, once identified as 'deformed,' the wife gains access to greater social privilege than ever before – indicating, perhaps, that female gender is a far more potent marker for social exclusion than at least some 'disabilities' might be. Such is not the case, however, with 'mad' Shakespearean women, characters whose 'disability' compounds (rather than negates) their gendered identity. Bassler demonstrates

5 The most complete study to date on femaleness as a 'disability,' particularly in medieval England, is Pearman (2010).

that particular lyrical modes are used to 'disable' female characters – a procedure that becomes especially apparent in Iago's efforts to 'cloak' Desdemona as disabled. Disabling has become a tool for social exclusion, in a development Bassler ties to 'budding early modern discourses of wonder, curiosity, and views of the disabled as restrictive, outside of the norm, and unacceptable.' We are very far, indeed, from a universe in which 'disability' could have a liberating effect, as it did for Berengier or for the lepers and those who kissed them.

While the oppression/exclusion of Shakespeare's 'madwomen' in many ways aligns itself with modern 'social model' paradigms of disability as social barrier, it also shares with the preceding essays' subjects a series of insights into disability's multifarious contributions to the elaboration of medieval identity groups. The means by which 'disability' consolidates social affiliations prove more varied than a simple marginalization through which an able-bodied in-group might define, consolidate, and valorize itself through the exclusion of a 'disabled' out-group. Our four essays reveal four (or more) very different acts, each of which reconfigures social identities in its own way. Orlemanski's 'historical phenomenology' of the *kiss* offers a tweak on that salutation's 'normative function of community-building,' with lepers playing a crucial supporting role. For Augustin, social identity is upended or confirmed through *trickery*, wherein the ability to manipulate public perceptions of the normativity or non-normativity of *other people's bodies* accords greater social power/mobility to the trickster. Richardson highlights the potential of *drug use*, or self-'disabling' through the abuse of a substance known to produce dire aftereffects, to constitute a community of former drug users: people who share the same physical symptoms, offering each other a form of companionship that transgresses or redraws other social boundaries. Bassler illustrates the simultaneously exclusionary and expressive possibilities of *song*, an act that marginalizes the singer by marking her as 'mad,' but that also offers her a means of negotiating her mental condition. We must note that osculation, deceit, doping, and singing are everyday, fairly mainstream activities; the full participation of the medieval 'disabled' in these occupations proves that people with many 'disabling' conditions were *not* predominantly viewed as liminal figures existing, as Colin Barnes would have it, 'in a state of social suspension' (quoted in Metzler, 2006, 31). Our simple observation points once again to the value of an integrative, rather than an exclusionary and identitarian, approach to the study of bodily difference in medieval cultures.

The Only Thing the Disabled Have in Common ...

Mainstream Disability Studies has made possible many innovative inquiries into medieval health, madness, bodily (de)form(ation), and healing, and the

preceding discussion is not intended to diminish the debt that scholars of medieval disability owe to the pioneers of Disability Studies: they have framed key questions, developed critical models and vocabulary, offered compelling new readings of both canonical and underappreciated texts, and gained recognition of disability as a legitimate object of study. But where medieval humanistic studies meet the presentist, activist, social scientific tendencies that characterize much modern reflection and research on disability – what Bassler succinctly terms ‘the scholarship of advocacy’ – the need for a new direction in *medieval* disability studies becomes apparent. When we acknowledge the cultural constructedness of disability without insisting on an impairment/disability divide, when we consider that in medieval eyes the ‘disabled’ may have had nothing at all in common (not even ‘social oppression’), where do we proceed? It is my hope that this set of articles will inspire new approaches, new answers, new questions.

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