

PREMODERN HEALTH, DISEASE, AND DISABILITY



Connie L. Scarborough

Viewing Disability in Medieval Spanish Texts

Disgraced or Graced

Amsterdam
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Press

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Premodern Health, Disease, and Disability

This series is timely as the fields of premodern health and disability studies have grown rapidly in the last decade. To date, there is no series concentrating on early medicine, disabilities, or health generally (see related series below). Premodern Health, Disease, and Disability would cover all topics concerned with health, disease, and disability – including injury, impairment, medical care, physicians, and hospitals – before about 1800. The board would entertain material from all parts of the globe, but given our own contacts will encourage those studying Europe and the Mediterranean from antiquity to the end of the Early Modern period.

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Dedicated to Charles

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Introduction: Disability Theory and Pre-Modern Considerations

As the field of disability studies has grown over the last 40 years, there has been increasing critical interest in how current notions and attitudes toward the impaired were shaped historically.¹ While the present study is not one of social history but rather of textual analysis of literary texts – as these will be broadly defined – its aim is to introduce a heretofore largely unexplored body of work within disability studies. I will examine a variety of texts produced in Medieval Spain to determine how individuals with physical impairments were presented. This study will establish two main paradigms for how the disabled are portrayed in works produced in Spain during the Middle Ages – the impaired individual was either perceived as having been punished by God for a sin he/she had committed or, conversely, as a potential recipient of divine reversal of impairment in response to prayer and sincere belief in a cure. In broad brushstrokes, these two extremes reflect the principle that if God could give He could also take away – you could be disgraced or graced by the same omnipotent divinity. But between these extremes this analysis also reveals a myriad of other, often contradictory, notions about disability as it appears in Medieval texts: as a measure for denying certain rights or privileges, a motive for charitable acts, or the opportunity to emulate the suffering of Christ, to name but a few.

My readings of a wide-range of texts from Pre-Modern Spain, far from being an esoteric exercise, adds to previous scholars' efforts to unearth and understand how ideas of bodily difference were portrayed in the past. This may, in turn, further a better understanding of how our current concepts about the disabled, normalcy, and physical variety have developed. An examination of the disabled as they appear in Medieval texts is a useful tool to discover how and why writers portrayed impaired individuals as they did and what ideas about physical difference might have meant to their society at large.

From the outset of any study on disability, it should be noted that singling out the physically impaired for critical study is a fundamentally different exercise from approaches designed to recuperate under-represented minority groups in literature. Disability studies is not merely another attempt to be inclusive as is the goal of critical analyses based on notions of race, gender,

1 See, for example, the works by Brueggemann, Davis, Metzler, Newman, Pearman, Silverman, Stiker, and Wheatley as cited.

sexual orientation, etc.² In contrast to other identity groups, characters with physical impairments frequently appear in literary texts. This fact has led David Mitchell to posit a hypothesis that he admits is paradoxical: '[D]isabled peoples' social invisibility has occurred in the wake of their perpetual circulation throughout literary history.³ This study will show that in texts produced in Medieval Spain the disabled frequently appear as historical figures, members of a legal category, and as fictive characters.

Although my primary focus is literary texts, I also include other works such as legal treatises, advice manuals, and some historical tracts.⁴ I take into account these categories of texts, which would not today be classified as literature, for several reasons. In the case of legal texts, Medieval works of law contain much more than statutes or lists of punishments for particular crimes. They could more properly be classified as manuals for good behaviour and as blueprints for a well-ordered society. In a similar vein, advice manuals, often intended for a sovereign or other person in a position of authority, reveal much about what a society valued and how one should act in order to uphold and preserve those values. Works that are labelled as histories or chronicles in the Medieval period were not based on contemporary academic notions of historical accuracy but rather on accumulated knowledge and mythology about events and individuals. As such, they can provide valuable information about how a society included, or excluded, impaired individuals and what roles they may have played in narratives that reflected their collective memory. Another type of text that one would assume to be useful in a study such as the present are medical manuals. However, in fact, medical treatises rarely address physical impairments, presumably because these conditions were considered beyond medicine's power to reverse or substantially alter. Although there are some allusions to medical remedies for impairments, these are few and seem to address conditions that could render the patient only temporarily disabled as the consequence of an illness or accident. Thus, although I will present some evidence from medical texts, these have not proved as useful for the

2 Mitchell, 'Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor', pp. 18-19.

3 'Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor', p. 19. Mitchell further claims that this omnipresence of impaired individuals as literary characters occurs because 'the representation of disability strikes at the very core of cultural definitions and values' ('Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor', p. 19).

4 By including a wide range of texts, I am following Irina Metzler who proposes that 'the story of medieval disabled persons [can] be unearthed from texts pertaining to legal history, from philosophical treatises, from works of literature, and from social and economic sources' (*A Social History*, p. 3).

present study as the other types of works I will examine. Furthermore, for this study, I include only physical impairments, since the portrayal of mental impairments would require a range of theological, philosophical, and psychological considerations beyond the scope of this project.⁵

As a first step, this book will catalogue occurrences of disability in texts from Christian Medieval Spain. For these representations of the physically impaired, I will examine how disabilities are portrayed, enacted, and discussed in these texts and, finally, begin to draw some conclusions about the roles and functions the physically impaired play in the works consulted. While students and researchers in the field of Spanish Medieval literature will be familiar with many of the texts I include in the following chapters, I hope they will discover the disabled characters they may have overlooked in previous readings. If recognizing the potential vulnerability of an individual's physical condition is an essential part of what it means to be human, perhaps these Pre-Modern embodiments of disability can still illuminate ideas about how societies define humanity and react to bodily differences.

Disability Theories: Definitions and Limitations

While recognizing the critical imperative to place the portrayals of the physically impaired from the Middle Ages, as fully as possible, within the ideological and culture contexts in which they originated, a review of methodologies and theories of disability as academic discipline is a logical point of departure. Initially, disability studies revolved around two competing models – the medical and the social. The medical model views disability as an individual issue, a problem to be solved, cured or ameliorated by some form of prosthesis.⁶ In the medical model, the impaired individual is suffering from a type of pathology which the physician can ‘treat’ in order to bring the impaired individual more fully into the abled society. The social model, however, sees disability as a concept applied by a community to denote difference from that society's concepts of normalcy. The social model is careful to distinguish between the terms ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’: ‘An impairment, in this model, refers to a corporeal difference with which a

5 See, for example, Wendy Turner, ed., *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom*.

6 Siebers, ‘Disability in Theory’, p. 180. Davis speaks of medicine's control over the discourse about disability ‘as controlling as any described by Michel Foucault [...] The previous discourse, heavily medicalized and oriented toward care and treatment, served its institutional purposes well. But it failed to understand dialectically its own position in the economy of power and control, and it failed to historicize its own assumptions and agency’ (*Enforcing Normalcy*, p. 2).

person is born or that a person acquires during the course of his or her life. A person with an impairment only becomes disabled, though, when some kind of social obstruction (physical, perceptual, amongst others) denies that person the opportunity to participate in life fully, fairly, and completely.⁷ While this is an important distinction in modern and contemporary disability studies, for the Middle Ages, what may have constituted full, fair, and complete participation in life is difficult to determine and, even if it could be discerned, the definition for such participation would no doubt be radically different from that of contemporary, developed, Western societies.

A third model for approaching disability was later developed. Known as the cultural model, this theory does away with the distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability' and prefers to use only the term 'disability' because it sees the experience of disability and the environment in which the disabled live as mutually dependent. The cultural model does not separate the impaired individual from societal notions of normalcy because it holds that he/she must confront the physical and psychological parameters that those notions have established. As a result of the cultural model's theses about the mutual dependence between physical impairment and the environment, some critics have chosen to concentrate on the physicality of the disabled body. They advocate for accurate portrayals of the corporeal realities as experienced by the disabled individual.⁸ Exponents for a realistic, matter-of-fact portrayal of even the most intimate details of the lived existence of the impaired contend that other approaches to disability result in representations that would be unrecognizable to the disabled themselves.⁹ Some who follow the realist interpretation of disability argue that the only valid representations of it are those created by individuals who experience the physical reality of disability themselves.¹⁰ Although this may be a valid perspective, it must be recognized that historically many of the disabled characters in literature were created by authors who did not personally experience the disabilities they portray. Furthermore, since for Medieval texts often little is known about the author(s) involved in a work's production, this critical stance is untenable.¹¹

7 Eyler, 'Introduction: Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges', p. 5.

8 See Siebers, Butler, and Thomson for examples.

9 Siebers, 'Disability in Theory', p. 174.

10 Gareth Williams, in his chapter 'Theorizing Disability' in the *Handbook of Disability Studies*, speaks of the post-Foucauldian focus on the body that has led many adherents of the social model of disability to develop new theoretical approaches to the impaired body (p. 136).

11 A notable exception is Teresa de Cartagena whose works will be discussed in the chapter on Deafness.

A key element in contemporary discussions of disability is the concept of ableism. Fiona Kumari Campbell gives a succinct evaluation of ableism in her 2013 essay, 'Stalking Ableism': 'Central to the system of ableism are two elements, namely, the notion of the *normative* (and normal individual) and the *enforcement* of a *divide* between so-called perfected or developed humanity (how humans are supposedly meant to be) and the aberrant, the unthinkable, underdeveloped and therefore not really-human.'¹² While it may seem extreme to speak of disability as a 'not really-human' condition, being able-bodied, as Campbell goes on to discuss, can only fully be understood by its opposite. However, it should be noted that the idea of the normative with regard to the body did not appear in English until a little over 150 years ago; before the nineteenth century the most common word to describe the fully-abled was 'ideal'.¹³ Thus, in early periods the imperative to be normal – as opposed to abnormal – simply did not exist and bodies could exist on a sliding scale towards or away from the ideal body. The ideal body could also have been perceived, in Judeo-Christian terms, as ultimately inaccessible in the postlapsarian world. The ideal body, created in the image of God, and placed in the Garden of Eden was lost forever on the earthly plane and one might only hope to exist in such a body in an after-life. Since only resurrected bodies would be 'ideal', the degree of ableness in this world might be seen as irrelevant. In fact, critics of modernity, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, point out that moderns are in denial about their own fragility and believe that feelings such as pain and suffering can be ameliorated, or even erased, by scientific essentialism.¹⁴ In the Pre-Modern world, what are now considered negative realities – pain and suffering – were part and parcel of the fabric of life. As such, the ableist view, with its culturally-fabricated notions of normalcy, did not hold the kind of psychological and institutional sway in the Middle Ages that it does today. The realities of corporal existence simply could not be 'corrected' or made to conform to a particular paradigm for people in the Pre-Modern era.

Adapting Disability Studies for the Pre-Modern Era

Since I will examine the experience of impairment in a specific Pre-Modern cultural and historical context, my theoretical approach does not strictly

12 Campbell, 'Stalking Ableism', p. 215. Emphasis in the original.

13 Davis, 'Crips Strike Back', p. 504.

14 Hughes, Goodley, Davis, 'Conclusion: Disability and Social Theory', p. 313.

adhere to any of the models used for contemporary analyses. As such, I do not make a conscious effort to distinguish between the terms 'impairment' and 'disability' as dictated by the social model for example. I do, however, view the impaired as dependent on the physical and social realities in which they exist and, in this aspect, my approach is more closely aligned with the cultural model. Whenever possible, I try to relate the physical circumstances of the impairment itself to the cultural environment in which it occurs. In this manner, images begin to emerge which, in turn, illuminate how authors in Pre-Modern Spain incorporated, described, and integrated the disabled into their texts.

It should be noted that some scholars argue that the term 'disabled' is anachronistic when applied to writings from the Middle Ages since the period possessed no one word to describe people who were lame, blind, or deaf (to name but a few conditions now categorized as disabilities). Sara Newman, for example, argues that the standardization of social perceptions and practices surrounding disability occurred after the sixteenth century, facilitated by the technological advancement in print and medicine. She contends that '[t]he advent of mechanical printing is concurrent with the appearance of the actual word "disability" as well as with the ability to spread emerging categorical cultural considerations of it more widely and systematically'.¹⁵ By contrast, in the Medieval period, the variety of terms and the indistinct descriptions of the disabled who were often considered together with, and often indistinguishable from, the poor, the old, or the infirm complicates our understanding of the status of the disabled during this period.¹⁶ In one aspect, however, illness, sickness, or disease can be differentiated from disability by noting that Medieval medicine viewed illness as a dynamic state whereas disability was static.¹⁷ Illness changes and evolves, resulting in either the patient's recovery or death, whereas a physical impairment, whether congenital or acquired, was considered a permanent state.¹⁸ John Theilmann concurs with Irina Metzler when he notes that, in the Middle Ages, those suffering from disease were seen as sick but, once the symptoms of a disease had passed, the person was redefined as healthy. He further contends that Medieval physicians often did not draw connections between diseases and the physical impairments

¹⁵ Newman, *Writing Disability*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Metzler, *A Social History*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ Metzler specifically cites Arnau de Vilanova (c. 1240-1311), doctor and professor at Montpelier, on this point (*A Social History*, p. 5).

¹⁸ Metzler, *A Social History*, p. 5.

that might result from them.¹⁹ Some scholars insist on what Theilmann labels 'retrospective diagnosis' with regard to studies on Medieval impairments or diseases. However, laboratory analysis is almost impossible to undertake and definitions of disease and the ways they are described has changed significantly over time, making such an approach specious.²⁰ For his part, Edward Wheatley dismisses outright any application of the medical constructs of disability when dealing with the Medieval period since medical knowledge competed with traditional beliefs about the impaired. Furthermore, there was not an established and all-powerful medical profession as such in the Middle Ages since medical knowledge 'based in universities, monasteries, or folk practices was too decentralized to wield the institutional and discursive power that it has today'.²¹ As this study will demonstrate, the perceived and real permanence of a physically disabling condition came to be associated with miracle cures, whereas illness could be medically treated even though recovery clearly was not guaranteed.

Any study of the disabled that tries to reconstruct both aesthetic and ethical mores around those with impairments from a time remote from our own faces some real challenges. As early as 1999, Lennard Davis drew attention to the scholarly debate about whether people with disabilities were better off now than in the past.²² While there is some evidence that individuals with physical disabilities, especially if the impairment was acquired in battle, were respected in Pre-Modern cultures, there are other competing paradigms that must be considered. Social historians have addressed some of these issues and provide valuable insights for a study such as the present one. In her book, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, Irina Metzler astutely observes that 'impairment can carry widely differing notions of disability with it. Potentially stigmatizing conditions which are formally identical can have different meanings to people from different cultures around the world, and by implication to different cultures in time as well'.²³ In other words, in order to understand why some bodies were considered as fully-abled or as disabled in the Pre-Modern era requires examining how

19 Theilmann, 'Disease or Disability?', p. 203.

20 'Retrospective diagnosis presents problems in several ways. Even though it is possible to undertake laboratory analysis on DNA from past times with the use of polymerase chain reaction (PCR), obtaining genetic material is often difficult and the use of PCR must be done with extreme caution in order to avoid contaminating samples' (Theilmann, 'Disease or Disability?', pp. 200-01).

21 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, p. 9.

22 Davis, 'Crips Strike Back', p. 505.

23 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, p. 29.

these concepts, if they existed as such a dichotomy, were defined within their own historical and cultural environments. To this end Wheatley argues for a consideration of 'distinctly medieval constructions that did not grow out of the nature of the impairment but made it a disability in ways specific to that era'.²⁴ For example, in the Middle Ages the human body was considered as a microcosm that reflected, negatively and positively, what occurred in the wider social sphere or the macrocosm. This concept led to the belief that anything that was wrong in the macrocosm, especially sin, could be manifest in the microcosm of an individual body. It followed, then, that corruption of a society (macrocosm) might be manifest in a disabled body (microcosm).²⁵ Acceptance of the fact that an impairment or birth defect might result from moral aberration or be sent as a warning to a society places the cultural construct of disability in a much different light from contemporary thinking about the physically impaired.²⁶ Another concept that must be taken into consideration when placing disability within Medieval Christendom is that of the individual as *imago Dei*. In sharp contrast to the pagan notion that human value is acquired, the Christian ethos argued for the inherent sanctity of all human life since humans were created in God's image.²⁷ Christianity introduced moral obligations to care for the unfortunate – including, but

24 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, p. 6. Wheatley further contends that '[o]ur historical distance from the Middle Ages allows us to see these constructions of [disability] with greater clarity because modern ones are so different' (*Stumbling Blocks*, p. 6). Joshua Eyler agrees with Wheatley and advocates for the 'need to develop new models that take into account the aspects of medieval social and religious systems that cannot be completely explained by modern constructionist models' ('Introduction: Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges', p. 2).

25 Newman-Stille, 'Morality and Monstrous Disability', pp. 234-35. It should be noted that there was diversity of opinion about the association of sin with disability in the Middle Ages and it is an exaggeration to state that all depictions of the impaired equated the condition with sin (Newman-Stille, 'Morality and Monstrous Disability', pp. 237-38).

26 For example, Gerald of Wales (c. 1146-c. 1223) writes in his *Topographia Hibernica*, 'just as those who are kindly fashioned by nature turn out fine, so those that are without nature's blessing turn out in a horrible way' (quoted in Newman-Stille, 'Morality and Monstrous Disability', p. 235).

27 Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith*, pp. 62-63. Amundsen addresses, at some length, the exposure or killing of defective new-borns in classical antiquity. He finds no laws in Greece or Rome that prohibited these practices and, if any such laws existed, they appear not to have been enforced. He further contends that 'in Roman culture the killing of defective new-borns was common, and was even apparently required in the case of those infants so grossly deformed or unusual to appear to be *portentosi* or monstrous births. For Greece, however, we have seen only the anomalous conditions in Sparta and the "ideal" practices suggested by Aristotle and Plato. They really tell us little about conditions in Greek society during the classical period' (*Medicine, Society, and Faith*, p. 60). The evidence presented by Amundsen leads him to two conclusions: 'One is that the *care* of defective new-borns simply was not a medical concern in classical antiquity. The second is that the morality of the killing of sickly or deformed new-borns

not limited to, the widowed, the orphaned, the sick, and the poor – a notion that was virtually alien to Greek and Roman ethical beliefs.²⁸

The most common type of interaction between the impaired and the rest of Medieval society that is often cited by critics is through begging, but this limited notion of the position occupied by the disabled in Medieval society is only part of the picture. While the disabled did make up some portion of the begging poor it is wrong to assume that this was their only form of livelihood. Wheatley concludes that almsgiving should not be considered a primary factor controlling the lives of the disabled. He maintains that '[e]ven if we assume that the majority of people with disabilities needed alms or institutional care, many would have needed neither, and therefore charity would not have constructed their experience of disability'.²⁹ While Wheatley's qualifications about the disabled and their relationship to the poor with regard to their need for charitable assistance are well-argued, a disability that rendered one unable to work could have significant consequences. The poor, too, were not the only group that shared some of the experiences of the disabled. The chronically ill were among those who might also require special assistance or benefit from charitable almsgiving. Furthermore, the realities of the impaired individual's existence depended on a number of other factors, including gender, economic status, family support, place of residence, etc.

Metzler ultimately concludes that the physically disabled in the Middle Ages lived in a liminal state, not fully members of the able-bodied society but neither totally excluded from it. For these reasons she rejects the term marginalized for the disabled. Metzler's arguments against the term marginalization are much more nuanced and qualified than those expressed earlier by Henri-Jacques Stiker, who argued for an almost utopian inclusion and acceptance of the disabled within Medieval society. Stiker claims that 'the disabled, the impaired, the chronically ill were spontaneously part of the world and of a society that was accepted as being multifaceted, diversified, disparate. The kind of social eugenics that was to be the fate of recent society had not yet emerged. Normalcy was a hodgepodge, and no one was concerned with segregation, for it was only natural that there should be malformations'.³⁰ Davis picks up this same chord when he pronounces that '[p]reindustrial societies tended to treat people with impairments as part

appears not to have been questioned, at least not in extant sources, either by nonmedical or by medical authors' (*Medicine, Society, and Faith*, p. 62).

28 Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith*, p. 13.

29 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, p. 14.

30 Stiker, *A History of Disability*, p. 65.

of the social fabric'.³¹ To Stiker's and Davis's credit, they are not postulating the contemporary notion of accommodation toward the disabled for the Medieval period but argue more for the reality of a society in which significant numbers of the physically impaired probably existed.³² Wheatley specifically comments on a lack of historical data that would support a claim that people with impairments were integrated into their societies 'because they lived lives too unexceptional to leave lasting textual evidence'.³³

The Role of the Church and Christian Beliefs

One of Wheatley's key contentions is that the Church ultimately controlled discourse about and treatment of the disabled in the Middle Ages. He finds this particularly true with regard to the Christian imperative to give charity to the less fortunate. His opinion finds some support in Stiker's observations about the rich assuring their salvation by giving alms to the poor and the disabled.³⁴ Wheatley also affirms that the Church's promotion of stories of miraculous cures of the ill and impaired kept those suffering with disabilities within the powerful grasp of the Church.³⁵ Joshua Eyler takes issue with Wheatley's contention about the power of the Church because it implies what he calls a 'top-down' approach and points out that '[n]ot every medieval person followed the ideology of the Church either exactly or unquestioningly'.³⁶ Louise Elizabeth Wilson centres her argument about the Church's relationship to the disabled on its concern for the soul of the faithful who experienced illness or other physically-limiting condition. Instead of focusing on the causal relationship between impairment and

31 Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, p. 3. It seems a bit contradictory that Davis qualifies this statement by adding that preindustrial societies integrated the disabled into society but treated them unkindly (*Enforcing Normalcy*, p. 3). He presents no evidence to support this qualification.

32 One could argue that the main reasons for physical impairment – congenital defects, maiming in accidents, and injuries resulting from warfare – are the same as those operative today, but the percentage of disabled individuals was probably higher than in contemporary, developed societies due to improvements in pre-natal care, safety regulations, and technologies of war in which significant numbers of the military are not involved in direct physical combat.

33 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, p. 8.

34 Braddock and Parish echo this opinion when they contend that 'the poor were perceived to offer opportunities for wealthier citizens to do good by providing alms'. They further conclude that '[i]n this context, persons with disabilities doubtless had more widespread acceptance as part of the poor' ('An Institutional History of Disability', p. 19).

35 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, p. 12.

36 Eyler, 'Introduction: Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges', p. 7.

sin, she interprets the Church's role as one that focused 'on the perceived effects that enduring such conditions could have on the spiritual state of a petitioner'.³⁷ Contrition and abiding faith, Wilson contends, were perceived as paramount in attaining a cure from illness or the removal of physical impairment.³⁸ In the Church, as well, there existed the belief that any bodily suffering, including physical impairment, emulated that of Christ's passion and, therefore, served to strengthen one's faith in the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus.³⁹ Any disability or illness, when endured with patience, was believed 'to bring the soul of the sufferer into a state of true contrition and resolute faith'.⁴⁰

If suffering was a part of a Medieval Christian's identity, there also existed the abiding belief that physical impairment could be visited on an individual as a punishment for sin.⁴¹ Wheatley claims that 'Medieval Christianity often constructed disability as a spiritually pathological site of absence of the divine where "the works of God [could] be made manifest"'.⁴² Some of the Church fathers promoted the link between impairment, illness, and sin, such as St. John Chrysostom (CE 347-407) who, in a homily about the paralytic cured by Christ stressed that sin was the root of the man's condition.⁴³ This spiritual appropriation of the disabled contributed to the idea that the impaired individual was somehow marked by God. This association continues to manifest itself in many contemporary folk beliefs around the world as

37 Wilson, 'Hagiographical Interpretations of Disability', p. 136.

38 Wilson, 'Hagiographical Interpretations of Disability', p. 136. Despite the Church's emphasis on spiritual healing, Darrel Amundsen concludes that all patristic sources held that consulting physicians was in no way inappropriate for Christians and that God could cure through a physician but also that He could affect cures without the doctor's knowledge or medications (*Medicine, Society, and Faith*, pp. 6-7).

39 Hutchinson speaks of Christ on the cross as a disabled God who stands as a metaphor for the fragility of the body ('Disabling Beliefs?', p. 18). On this subject, see also, Nancy Eiesland's *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberating Theology of Disability*.

40 Wilson, 'Hagiographical Interpretations of Disability', p. 157. Perhaps the most famous example of physical suffering in order to imitate Christ was St. Francis. Francis was not only a model of self-denial but recently historians, such as Donna Trembinski, have drawn attention to Francis's various disabilities such as impaired sight and limited mobility ('An Infirm Man', pp. 274-75).

41 Amundsen distinguishes a particular nuance of such a belief that is worth noting: '[I]t is one thing to maintain that a person is sick as a punishment for a specific sin to which he or she is obstinately and tenaciously clinging, but it is quite another matter to attribute one's own sickness to one's general sinfulness and see the sickness as part of God's punitive and refining process' (*Medicine, Society, and Faith*, p. 188).

42 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, p. 11.

43 Wilson, 'Hagiographical Interpretations of Disability', p. 153.

Wayland Hand and others have catalogued. The phrase 'marked by God' has had surprisingly long staying power as many popular refrains attest.⁴⁴

Some critics cite Biblical authority as a source for the historical association between sin and disability. But, as Metzler has established, there are, in fact, surprisingly few physical or mental impairments that actually appear in Biblical narratives. In the Old Testament, God's wrath with the wickedness of humankind is more often expressed through punishments such as war, pestilence, earthquake, storm, fire, or blight than the infliction of impairment on an individual.⁴⁵ The most often cited passages from the Old Testament about disability are found in Deuteronomy and Leviticus.⁴⁶ In Chapter 28 of Deuteronomy, sin is connected with physical imperfection and those who disobey divine law are afflicted with illnesses or impairments.⁴⁷ Especially Deuteronomy 28:27-29 includes a host of afflictions, among which are found some that would now be labelled as disabilities:

The Lord will smite you with the boils of Egypt, and with the ulcers and the scurvy and the itch of which you cannot be healed. The Lord will smite you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind; and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness [...]

Some of the most famous proscriptions about the disabled are found in Leviticus and concern who may not serve as a priest. Forbidden from priestly service are the blind, the lame, the disfigured, the deformed, anyone with a crippled hand or foot, hunchbacks, dwarfs, anyone with eye or skin disease, and eunuchs (Leviticus 21:18-20).⁴⁸ Metzler feels that this passage has been

44 Among the many examples, cited by Matilde Cuevas Díaz in *La imagen de los discapacitados en la literatura tradicional*, are the following:

'Al que nació señalado, no lo traigas a tu lado' (p. 24) ('He who is born marked, don't have him by your side').

'Dios, no me ponga cercano del hombre señalado de su mano' (p. 24) ('God, don't put me close to one marked by Your hand').

'De hombre a quien Dios señaló, ni la conversación' (p. 24) ('Of the man marked by God, not even conversation').

'Guárdate de aquel a quien Dios señaló' (p. 24) ('Guard yourself from one marked by God').

All these and related phrases imply that even being in the company of those 'marked by God' is dangerous either from fear of contagion, repulsion, or sin by association.

45 Hand, 'Deformity, Disease and Physical Ailment', p. 525.

46 There are other references to the disabled found in Genesis, Exodus 1 and 2, Samuel 2, Chronicles, and Zechariah.

47 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, p. 39.

48 Even though at first reading, this list appears excessively exclusionary, Hutchinson reminds us that since the Hebrew conception of personhood was embodied and physical, 'the impure

overemphasized and that, in fact, it tells us very little about actual prohibitions for the disabled in the Middle Ages.⁴⁹ Even though papal edicts in the Medieval period decreed that those with physical deformity, mutilations, or serious blemishes could not enter high orders, it is not known if any such restrictions were placed on other clerics (lower orders) or lay brothers and sisters.⁵⁰ In the Middle Ages, canon law as penned by Raymond of Peñafort (d. 1275) was even more influential than Gratian's *Decretum* (twelfth century) and Raymond promoted the idea of healthy individuals, especially in positions of responsibility within the Church. Raymond declared that fully-abled individuals were best suited 'to fight for the Church' and even stated that the faithful might be discouraged by the example of infirm or disabled clergy.⁵¹ In Spain, Alfonso X's monumental thirteenth-century law code, the *Siete Partidas* (*Seven Parts*) reflected canonical law in its proscriptions about the disabled becoming priests and also places restrictions on their abilities to serve as judges or witnesses in court, write and administer wills, and even to marry. These proscriptions will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters but suffice it here to say that the *Siete Partidas* serves as a good example of a Medieval Christian ruler's attempt to establish the legal status of the disabled among his subjects. These laws include outright injunctions or exclusions of impaired individuals from certain activities but also some exemptions from taxes or duties as well as a recognition of the need to assist and protect them.

Turning to the New Testament's teaching about the disabled, physical impairment is not viewed as a punishment but rather as an opportunity for healing.⁵² Disability is most often mentioned in connection with miracles performed by Jesus or one of His apostles. Perhaps the most emblematic of all the miracles performed by Jesus is the healing of the man born blind from the Gospel of St. John. When his disciples ask Jesus if the man was blind due to his own sin or that of his parents, Jesus replies that sin played no part in the man's impairment. According to Jesus, the man is blind so that God's power may be revealed. According to Colleen Grant, '[n]ot only is the healing unconditional but the disciples' concern for determining the "past cause of the man's blindness" is [...] replaced with focus on the "future

associations documented in Leviticus may relate to broader priestly concerns for discerning how the impaired body reflects the "image of God" ('Disabling Beliefs?', p. 13).

49 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, p. 40.

50 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, pp. 40-41.

51 Trembinski, 'An Infirm Man', p. 277.

52 See, for example, Hebrews 12: 12-13.

purpose" of the impairment'.⁵³ Figuring prominently in the Pauline Books of the New Testament are images of impairment in relationship to the body of Christ crucified. The paradox of God's power made complete in a disabled body is central to Paul's theology and his appeal for believers to become the image of Christ perforce entailed physical suffering.⁵⁴ Stiker takes up the notion of the disabled as reflections of the suffering Christ and associates this attitude with the rise of the Franciscan movement in the thirteenth century. The dignity of the poor, as preached by Francis, was extended to other marginalized groups, such as the physically impaired, who came to be seen as embodying suffering akin to that of Christ.⁵⁵

While it is undeniable that the Medieval Church was a prominent influence on attitudes about the disabled, it is also true that Christian teaching was not hostile to the medical profession or to individuals seeking medical solutions for affliction as some may assume. Even though the Church held that God was the ultimate cause of all disease and impairment and the care of one's spiritual well-being was of foremost importance, it did not assert that efforts to find medicinal cures were to go against God's will.⁵⁶ For example, a decree from the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, that later became codified in canon law in the *Decretals* of Gregory IX, states that '[s]ince bodily infirmity is sometimes caused by sin, the physician ought to ensure a patient hears confession before the physician applies the medical treatment so that the soul is "cured" prior to the body'.⁵⁷ The key word here is, of course, *sometimes*, and the Church viewed any physical trauma as an opportunity for the faithful to participate in the sacrament of confession.

Sara Newman over-generalizes when she categorically states that in the Middle Ages the Church's spiritual guidelines about physical impairment held that 'problematic physical conditions [...] were obstacles, i.e. disabilities, to be removed from blocking the path to salvation, a goal which required perfect bodies and souls'.⁵⁸ While Church teaching is central in any discussion of Medieval European texts it was not a monolithic presence and the perfect body was certainly not a requirement for salvation. It is true,

53 Grant, 'Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives', pp. 79-80.

54 Hutchinson, 'Disabling Beliefs?', p. 14. See 2 Corinthians 3:18.

55 Stiker, *A History of Disability*, pp. 80-81.

56 Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith*, p. 11. Amundsen also observes that '[m]edicine was a standard part of the medieval curriculum, and it is not uncommon to encounter educated clerics requesting medical handbooks and both seeking and giving medical advice' (*Medicine, Society, and Faith*, p. 194).

57 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, pp. 46-47.

58 Newman, *Writing Disability*, p. 6.

however, that the reversal or cure of a disabling condition was believed to come ultimately from God since contemporary medical knowledge could not address most issues of physical impairment. Hagiographic texts, especially, include numerous accounts of impaired individuals seeking divine intervention to reverse an impairment. As this study will show, Newman's stance that 'physical problems were common and generally undifferentiated by categories' in the Middle Ages is not entirely accurate either.⁵⁹ Those who had limited mobility, such as the lame, as well as the blind, the deaf, and those who suffered irreversible and debilitating illness such as leprosy, were perceived in different lights that effected their portrayals.

Disability Studies and Literary Texts

Heretofore, the engagement of disability studies with literary works has focused primarily on modern or contemporary texts.⁶⁰ While some of the tenets proposed in these studies can be adapted for use in an investigation of works produced in the Pre-Modern period, they, like general theoretical approaches to disability, must be modified to take into account the belief systems and social realities of the time of the texts' production. An apt starting point for examining how some studies of modern literature and disability can prove useful for those involving Medieval texts is the work of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. Mitchell and Snyder identify two essential functions that disabled people perform in literary works – they are either portrayed as stock characters or as an 'opportunistic metaphorical device'.⁶¹ They label literature's dependence on disability as a 'narrative prosthesis' since '[d]isability lends a distinctive idiosyncrasy to any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the "norm"'.⁶² In another study by Mitchell and Snyder, 'The Uneasy Home of Disability in Literature and Film', the authors address how various critics, over time, have attempted to explain the enduring popularity of the disabled in literary texts. They speak of the 'negative image school', consisting of those scholars

59 Newman, *Writing Disability*, p. 41.

60 Notable exceptions are the studies by Brody, Martínez García, Mendizábal, Turner, Pearman, and Walter, as cited.

61 Mitchell and Snyder, 'Narrative Prosthesis', p. 222.

62 Mitchell and Snyder, 'Narrative Prosthesis', p. 222. Mitchell, in a related study, also defines disabled individuals that appear in literature as undisciplined because they do not conform to the narratives established for them either by medical or rehabilitative models ('Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor', p. 16).

who found the disabled to be presented in overwhelmingly stereotypical fashion or, at worst, in ways that humiliated them.⁶³ This school emphasized the isolation of the disabled individual who was often embittered and angry, and frequently defeated by his/her physical condition. It held that 'disability portrayals could be understood best as a form of cathartic revenge in which the stigmatizers [the able-bodied] punish the stigmatized [disabled individuals] to alleviate their own worries and fears about bodily vulnerability and inhumane social conditions'.⁶⁴ Derek Newman-Stille echoes a similar view when he states that 'the disabled themselves bodily represent the fears of the able-bodied, embodying the worry of eventually potentially becoming disabled, of being injured or hurt, and being different'.⁶⁵ The negative image school awakened some scholars to a more politicized view of disability which first manifested itself in efforts to show how the vast majority of the portrayals of the disabled were inaccurate. These scholars, however, did not posit positive images of the disabled to counter the negative ones found in literature or film. They argued that even when the disabled were portrayed as heroes, the realities of their lives were often distorted and could result in them becoming characters in a freak show.⁶⁶ These scholars directly argue for images of the disabled that reveal the physical and attitudinal struggles that the impaired face on a daily basis. While this model is extremely useful in pointing out the relationship of literary representations of the disabled to societal attitudes, the advocacy element inherent in it, while laudable, is not directly applicable to analysis of Medieval art forms.

Neither the construction of disability as a negative prosthesis in literature nor the assertions about the impaired as negative images to compensate for the fears of the able-bodied is entirely valid when considering Medieval texts. It is difficult to determine if the impaired serve solely to differentiate and highlight the norm since notions about normalcy in the Pre-Modern world differ from contemporary ones. Similarly, what constituted a stereotypical portrayal of the disabled is complicated when considering Medieval texts since modern notions about stereotypes have been formed by repetitive models that may have been unknown to Pre-Modern authors. Additional problematic factors affecting the validity of disability approaches to modern literature when considering Medieval works is the frequent lack of

63 'The argument of the negative imagery school set out to establish a continuum between limiting literary depictions and dehumanizing social attitudes toward disabled people' (Mitchell and Snyder, 'The Uneasy Home', p. 197).

64 Mitchell and Snyder, 'The Uneasy Home', p. 198.

65 Newman-Stille, 'Morality and Monstrous Disability', p. 253.

66 Mitchell and Snyder, 'The Uneasy Home', p. 200.

knowledge about an author or the circumstances of a text's production. The contemporary importance of the author and his/her personal worldview are concepts that did not exist in the Middle Ages with many texts of unknown or dubious authorship. Fundamental too is consideration of the way that Medieval audiences interacted with texts in contrast to modern ideas about reading and interpreting literary works. The reception of texts differed significantly from the way contemporary readers process such materials. Fictional narratives, poetry, advice manuals, legal pronouncements, and historical accounts were all designed not simply to either, on the one hand, entertain or, on the other, to provide objective information. For Medieval audiences, either reading a text or, more often, listening to it being read, was an act of 'demonstrative rhetoric that reached out and grabbed the reader, involved him or her in praise and blame, in judgments about effective and ineffective human behaviour. They engaged the reader, not so much in the unravelling of meaning as in a series of ethical meditations and of personal ethical choices.'⁶⁷ Given this model for textual reception in the Middle Ages, essentially any written work would engage its public in critical decisions about their own lives and how they interact with their fellow human beings. Literature in the Middle Ages, too, especially depended on precedent and established sources considered authoritative. Thus, portrayals of the disabled would have relied more prominently on literary exemplarity and established motifs than do modern works in which originality or novelty of approach is valued.

Goals and Organization

Sara Newman calls for examining materials about disabled individuals 'in their original social contexts' and goes on to argue for an understanding of cultural artefacts, such as texts, as an exercise in historical reconstruction.⁶⁸ To investigate how authors in the Pre-Modern era write about physical impairment, I have tried, where possible, to provide a theological, legal, or medical background in order to comprehend, as fully as possible, the beliefs and practices that inform these works. I agree with Theilmann who insists on viewing disability through the lens of the era and warns against trying to enforce modern notions about the impaired on earlier historical periods.⁶⁹

67 Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading*, p. xvii.

68 Newman, *Writing Disability*, p. 4.

69 Theilmann, 'Disease or Disability?', p. 228.

Literature can be a means to demonstrate that norms themselves change over time and cultures, and analyses of artistic production reveal that ideas about normalcy are both artificial and malleable.⁷⁰ As with any artistic representation, the disabled in literature are not some homogenous class with no consideration for individual differences.⁷¹ In an essay published as recently as 2012, Bill Hughes labels beliefs about the disabled in the Middle Ages as 'superstitious' and tries to establish that impaired individuals were invariably viewed with disgust by the able-bodied.⁷² This type of stereotypical representation of the Medieval period reveals anachronistic reasoning that needs to be countered by a careful study of precisely how impaired individuals were represented in Pre-Modern texts.

Joshua Eyler contends that medievalists need to 'unpack' the ways in which Medieval society viewed the impaired.⁷³ A goal of the present study is to reveal, or 'unpack', attitudes toward the disabled through an analysis of one body of Pre-Modern texts. The varied and conflicting ways that disability is portrayed in Medieval texts – as burden, punishment, object of charity, promise, or hope – indicate that Medieval authors did not hold a monolithic view towards disabled individuals.⁷⁴ Such indecisiveness and conflicting ideas in the presentation of those with physical impairments also implies a struggle with an enduring issue at the heart of disability studies, i.e., how do writers cope with and explore 'underrecognized and undertheorized facts of bodily difference'.⁷⁵

I have divided my investigations into chapters with each focusing on a specific impairment as seen in a variety of texts. Examining different representations of a particular disability affords various textual reactions to, and representations of, that condition while also discerning patterns – where they exist – in its portrayal. I will address lameness, blindness, deafness, lack of speech (most often associated with deafness in the Middle Ages), and also leprosy. The latter is technically an illness and not a physical impairment but the disease leads to disabling conditions and served as both a very real condition as well as metaphor in Medieval texts. Leprosy, too, was

70 'If one seeks to argue that the current predicament of and social attitudes toward people with disabilities are inadequate, then demonstrating the kaleidoscopic nature of historical responses to disability can prove an important tool for interrogating the "naturalized" ideology hiding behind current beliefs' (Mitchell and Snyder, 'The Uneasy Home', p. 214).

71 Williams, Gareth, 'Theorizing Disability', p. 139.

72 Hughes, 'Civilising Modernity', pp. 19-21.

73 Eyler, 'Introduction: Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges', p. 2.

74 Sticker, *A History of Disability*, p. 87.

75 Bérubé, 'Disability and Narrative', p. 570.

the one, most prominent disease of the Middle Ages (before the outbreaks of Bubonic plague beginning in the fourteenth century) for which there was no hope for a medical cure, despite some remedies proposed in medical texts. My decision to include leprosy in a study of the physically impaired is supported by John Theilmann's assertion that when leprosy became defined as permanent and contagious, 'the disfigurement and crippling produced [...] could be defined as a disability'.⁷⁶ Theilmann further contends that leprosy is a unique case that conflates the concepts of disease and disability because the disease was considered the initiator of a disability that became a permanent condition.⁷⁷ I also devote a chapter to the miraculous cures of disabling conditions. This part of the study is inspired by Jay Timothy Dolmage's paradigm of 'kill-or-cure' as the ultimate solution in narratives for dealing with disabled individuals. In the texts that I have studied, a physical impairment may result in death or long years of suffering (the kill principle), but one of the most dominant themes in Medieval literature is hope for a cure through divine intervention or grace, usually through the intercession of a saint or his/her relics. Hagiographic literature is replete with cures of all kinds of physical impairments and these will be treated selectively in that chapter. Although hagiographic texts are intentionally formulaic and designed to promote the sanctity of an individual, the number of the disabled and the variety of physical impairments presented in them can provide valuable clues to how these individuals were perceived and beliefs about the role of faith to reverse such conditions. A final chapter will offer some overriding conclusions about the ways the disabled were perceived and portrayed in texts produced in Pre-Modern Spain.

⁷⁶ Theilmann, 'Disease or Disability?', p. 214. Theilmann further contends that Medieval society had a multifaceted perception of leprosy that combined theories about contagion, the bodily humours, and divine intervention. As a result, the leper was stigmatized but not to the extent that was asserted by writers in the nineteenth century ('Disease or Disability?', p. 215).

⁷⁷ Theilmann, 'Disease or Disability?', p. 227.