Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World

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Editors

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CHAPTER 1

Embodied Difference: Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman

Richard H. Godden and Ain Simon Mittman

Nomen dictum quasi notamen, quod nobis vocabulo san res notas efficiat. Nisi enim nomen scirens, cognitio rerum perit.
[The noun is thus named as if it were “notamen,” because it makes things known to us. For unless you know a name, knowledge of a thing perishes.]
—Isidore of Seville, Etymologiae, 1.7.1

The Middle Ages and Early Modern periods were, in their own ways, highly bookish eras. As C. S. Lewis writes in The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature (1964), the Middle Ages had “an overwhelmingly bookish or clerical character ... In our own society most knowledge depends, in the last resort, on observation. But

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the Middle Ages depended on books. The book most thoroughly trusted, consulted, and revered was the Bible, a book that is, itself, rather concerned with its own status as a written text, nowhere more so than in the opening to the Vulgate Gospel of John (1:1): “In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word.” [3] These words matter. The choices Medieval and Early Modern authors made, and the choices that we make, matter. They shape, shift, and frame any discourse they comprise.

The words we rely upon to describe the twin subjects of this book—“monstrosity” and “disability”—are particularly charged, since they do not merely characterise pre-existing phenomena, but instead they create the conceptual categories they simultaneously populate. Richard H. Goldin and Jonathan Hys’s survey of recent literature on disability in the Middle Ages contains throughout its discussion a veritable thesaurus of terms. The bodies under discussion are described as having “physical difference ... bodies that figure as anormal or abnormal, miraculous or extraordinary, monstrous or deformed.” Medieval and Early Modern art and literatures are replete with images of non-normative bodies. Saints’ lives valorize physical challenges, fabulae render them metaphorical, medical texts pathologize them, and marginal images make them subjects of amusement. Divergent bodies are viewed as gifts from God, markers of sin, or manifestations of medical imbalances. In many cases throughout Western history, a figure marked by what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has termed “the extraordinary body” is labeled a “monster.”[4] Tony V. Pearson discusses normative Medieval perspectives that viewed such people as “deviant or dangerous” and the “social processes” that named and categorized them as “disabled” or “monstrous.”[5] On one hand, we

4 Goldin and Hys, “Analytical Survey,” 320;

1 EMBODIED DIFFERENCE: MONSTROSITY, DISABILITY...
himself was always more real to him than the actual thing itself, and we see why these mystical centuries had no conception of what men now call science. The study of things for their own sake held no meaning for the thoughtless man. How could it be otherwise when the universe was conceived as an utterance of the Word of which every created thing was a single word?10

That is, the underlying or pre-existing base reality of a phenomenon was, in the period, far less interesting, relevant, and significant than the words used to describe it, since the words were each shards of that first word that called the universe into being.11

The words we use to describe the divergent and non-normative bodies of the Middle Ages also prove to be particularly vexing because, as Lyn M. Mezler has observed, in the Middle Ages, there was no conception of the disabled as it would accord with modern notions of embodied difference.12 Instead of “disabled,” Mezler names such figures “impairment” from a socially constructed sense of “disability.” The disabled body, like the monstrous, is a “culture body” that “incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy.”13 The social model (and later the cultural model, whereby disability is pathologized, marked as something to be cured or eradicated. Similarly, Cohen’s cultural reading of the monster recuperates these abject figures from being simple objects of plot, waiting to be destroyed and defeated. Rather than distance the disabled or the monster as something evil or defective, Monster Studies and Disability Studies help us see how our construction of such categories implicate all of us and our fantasies of normality and wholeness. In looking for figures of the disabled and the deformed, then, scholars in Medieval Disability Studies have often fallen back on monstrousity as an overlapping or even equivalent category. When setting out her criteria for what counts as an impairment in the Middle Ages, for instance, Mezler includes “extreme deformations or monstrosities, for example, two heads, lack of mouth, twisted head, misplaced eyes, twisted feet.”15 Most significantly for a study of premodern Europe, we must necessarily look at the monstrous because that is where the disabled are often to be found.

Although the study of disability and the study of the monstrous have much in common, it is vital to note the divergent purposes of the two fields. As Kevin Stagg observes in his essay on monstrous births in the Early Modern period, Disability Studies and Monster Studies diverge primarily in their intent: discourses about disability treat it as a significant social category, on par with race, class, and gender, whereas those about the monster focus on anomaly and error, and the abjected body of the deviant.16 Even so, despite noting similar categorical distinctions, Henri-Jacques Siker cites several studies on the monstrous in his Medieval section of A History of Disability since the notion of monster is necessarily related to that of disability.17 But he goes on to caution that he “would emphatically underscore the deceptive character of any attempted merger of the two phenomena.” In envisioning this collection, we have also been wary of the “deceptive character” of bringing these two discourses together—chiefly, the word “monster” always draws in its wake a host of ethical and moral evaluations, a freight of signifiers that also weigh down the disabled. If Medieval writers locate the monstrous size of giants in the sin of pride, they also read phenomena such as the loss of sight as divine punishment.

Recent work in both Medieval and Early Modern studies of the disabled, however, have sought not to collapse the category of the monstrous and the disabled, but instead have developed alliances between the two fields in order to better understand non-standard bodies of all sorts. Stagg, for example, observes that although recourse to Monster Studies can be

10Emile Mile, Religion Art en France, XIIe century. A Study of Medieval Iconography and its Sources (London J. M. Dent and Sons, 1913), 33. This text was first published in French as A l'heure religieuse de XIIe stade en France, tudes sur l'iconographie du moyen age et sur ses sources d'inspiration (Paris F. Levst, 1898).
11Lyn M. Mezler, Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, C. 1100-1400 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.
ocluded the personal experience and significance of disability; attention to how the disabled becomes represented as monstrous reveals the social unease the deformed can spark. Also noting the often-related discourses about monstrousness and disability, Derek Newman Stille, in “Monstrosity and Monstrous Disability in Topographia Hibernica,” examines how “one form of Otherness is written as another,” arguing that “it is therefore not surprising that disability comes to be regarded [in Ireland] as monstrous, syncretising narratives of ‘otherness’ and difference.” As Stille’s and Newman Stille’s work demonstrates, the categories of disableness and monstrousness cannot be easily disentangled.

“MONSTER CRIPPLED”

In order to parse our central terms, to see what they might mean, how they function, and where they converge, we will focus on one small image that sits at the intersection of the discourses of monstrousness and disability. A page from folio 327r of a thirteenth-century French manuscript containing various Arthurian romances, we find a curious figure (Fig. 1.1). He is basically simian in form, which is also to say that he is largely humanoid, anthropomorphic, relatable, that he is, in essence, rather like one of us. The hunched figure has something of a mane and a larger ridge of fur along his back. His limbs, while shaggy with fur of a rusty lavender color, are more or less human in shape and, most unnervingly, end in hands. The small figure—just a bit over an inch tall, in a manuscript about 18½ inches high—leans on two bright orange crutches. One is propped in his right armpit, and the other supports his left leg, which is truncated, and ends in a bandaged wrapped stump. He stands with one hand outstretched and has a protruding tongue, slightly dangling, colored the same as the crutches.

This is a perfectly typical thirteenth-century page, which is to say that it is a very complex amalgam of words, images, materials, iconographies, and

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Trevor, MS François 95. A digital facsimile of full manuscript is available online at Gallica: (09/10/2009), https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b000001800. (accessed January 2019)

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narratives, replete with beauty and violence (Fig. 1.2). In the main image above, illustrating The Story of Merlin, Arthur and Merlin defeat King Rion in the Battle of Caroazure [Carhaix]. Their google-eyed horses trample three severed heads beneath their hooves, indicating the mortal consequences of combat. The rich gold leaf that forms a shimmering backdrop to this scene is worn in some places, revealing the gesso ground, colored red with a golden hue and therefore looking like specks and splatters of blood. However, it is only the small simian figure who bears what seems to be the lingering trace of violence. The men above are either vigorously alive or quite dead, but the hybrid monster below is consciously, even conscientiously, represented as disabled. Though he stands, how could he even move forward without dislodging the crutch that holds his amputated leg up?

Of course, it would be easy to say: Look at this figure! He is disabled, and he is a monster! Therefore, in the Middle Ages, people thought that the disabled were monsters! There has been some work in this direction, and there is certainly some truth in the assertion, but it is our intention in this collection of essays to move beyond such facile comparisons. It is vital to keep at the forefront of our minds that neither disability nor monstrousness
has any ontological status; that is, they are not states of being, though cultures often treat both as such. Rather, they are both encounters in which beings—human or otherwise—have meanings imposed on them from without. "While a monster is not analogous to a person with disabilities," Tory V. Pearman observes, "the social construction of monsters certainly shares overlapping characteristics with the social construction of disability." Overlapping, but not coterminous.

It is tempting to be cautious here, to be sure to state loudly and clearly that there is an essential difference between Medieval representations of monsters and of the disabled: monsters did not and do not exist, whereas people dwelling in and as "extraordinary bodies" most certainly did and do. This is, though, not really true. Since it is external forces that generate monstrosity, monsters were—and perhaps still are—real, too. Further, there are a great many monsters, human and animal, that appear in texts and images of the Middle Ages, some of which seem to bear the distinct imprint of actual observation. Gerald of Wales’s sympathetic oxman (Fig. 1.8), for example, cannot be as easily dismissed as the wild fantasies of the Alexander Romance in British Library Royal 20 B. xii, a lavishly illustrated fifteenth-century French Histoire de guerre [History of the Battles of Alexander] (Fig. 1.4). But what of our little fellow below the text of The Story of Merlin? How should we react to it? What sort of response does the manuscript solicits or elicits? How would the wealthy thirteenth-century French viewer respond? And how might we, today?

While the figure is not an illustration of the text in any direct way, he does resonate interestingly with it. The passage that starts just above him narrates an episode wherein Merlin comes to Arthur’s court in the guise of a blind minstrel, led by a dog. He plays remarkably well—they all looked at him in wonder because they had never heard such happy playing—and then asks, in recompense, to "bear [Arthur’s] ensign in the first battle [he

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Footnotes:

1 Tony V. Pearman, Women and Disability in Medieval Literature (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 24.


3 See Anna Suman Mittman, "The Other Close at Hand: Gerald of Wales and the "Mornes of the West, in The Monstrous Middle Ages, eds. Robert Millett and Bernto Balthasar (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 97-112.
Fig. 1.3 “Cymwa” and “Cymna Who Had Sex with a Goat,” Gerald of Wales, Topographia of Ireland, ca. 1250, London, British Library, Royal MS 15 B viii, f. 19r. (Photograph: © The British Library Board, reproduced under Creative Commons)

goeth to.” Arthur fails to recognize his friend and advisor, and declines, referring to him as “a minion who cannot lead himself,” and saying, “Our Lord put you in His prison by making you blind. How would you see to bear the banner and lead us into battle?” Arthur later realizes his error, and Merlin returns to his customary appearance, bearing the standard into a battle that results in a great victory. This battle, like so many in Arthurian


Fig. 1.4 “Battle with Horse-Headed Men,” Historia de praelia in a French translation (Le Livre et le roy lien doreau du bon roy Alexandre), c. 1420, London, British Library, MS Royal 20 B XX, f. 79. (Photograph: © The British Library Board, reproduced under Creative Commons)

cycles, is extraordinarily fierce, and “men fell down dead one on top of the other, and they lay in great heaps amid the ranks where the fighting was.” However, despite fighting so savage that Sir Gawain’s “arm and sword were all stained with blood and brains up to his shoulder,” the battle ends fairly cleanly. There are a great many dead and a great many seemingly uninjured survivors; only the duelers King Arthur and King Roan are left so badly injured “that they both needed a physician . . . they were both very
bely wounded." Even so, a few paragraphs later, Rion is dead—beheaded by Arthur—and Arthur is "back in good health." This narrative stands in sharp contrast with actual Medieval warfare, which "frequently led to wounded soldiers who survived," so many that Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries note the "startling survival rate among wounded soldiers, even those who received wounds that one might expect to have been fatal." There is no mark in this passage of the indelible traumas of war, even of "the psychological wounds that often accompanied the physical ones." Indeed, by the end of the day of fierce battle, there is "feasting and great rejoicing." If there is any lingering concern about the lasting effects of war, it is displaced to the lower margin, and into the monstrous body of the figure that Lilian Randall filed under the subject heading "Monster crippled" in her catalog of Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts.

In many ways, this illustration is wholly unremarkable. The figure is humanized, but not quite human. It is alien, but not wholly unfamiliar. Like so many other monsters that inhabit the margins of Medieval manuscripts, this little guy proves to be a curiosity. But what can we say about this figure's impairments? On his own, this seems like an amputee. When comparing the image with the text, one sort of prosthesis replaces another—crutches rather than a guide dog. The figure stands, seemingly supported comfortably by the crutches; he appears to be waiting, with his tongue sticking out. With his free hand stretched out, the figure could be a beggar, pursued by many disabled people in the Middle Ages. When placed in the context of this manuscript, with its many images of warfare or of incipient battle, we might be able to identify this figure as a veteran of war, or at least suggestive of one. Robert C. Woonson Savage and Kelly DeVries find that "limb-loss during battle was comparatively rare and that, when it did happen, even such a significant trauma could perhaps be survived." A more common cause of limb-loss seems to have been amputation, performed despite the high risk, to arrest the spread of gangrene resulting from less significant wounds, "since this was the only way to escape death." While we do not often have precise figures for such concerns, Carole Rawcliffe observes that, in 1374, approximately a quarter of the Provencal army showed signs of scarred hands or faces. Further, she goes on, many English soldiers during the Hundred Years War came home wounded and mutilated. Of course, we cannot identify the marginal figure as having received its injury in a particular, historical battle, nor would we argue that he is a narrative illustration of the violent text he accompanies, but the juxtaposition of our guy with the image above it of two armies clashing draws out a narrative of war and bodily harm. Many left for war as stout young men and returned injured, dependent, and liminal. As Wendy Turner notes, "[i]t could be hard on a family to cope with a disabling wound; the cost involved in ordering prosthetics might be prohibitive, if they could be fitted or managed, let alone the psychological cost of a lost limb, scarred face, or missing eye." Even within one's own family, a wounded soldier might well be marginalized. Like the monstrous, the disabled escape easy categorization—indeed, they fall or are pushed out of the normative structures of the period. In the main illustrations in The Story of Merlin, the categories are far more distinct: good/bad, living/dead. The marginal figure from The Story, along with other one in the manuscript, stresses liminality. As Irena Metzlzer argues, liminality for the impaired could relate to "to being in-between, as in occupying a space between two different stages of being ... [T]he impaired persons are neither sick nor healthy, their condition is not an illness that
either disappears again, or gets worse and kills the individual, but a permanent, incurable state between the two categories of health and illness. This little gap, then, is truly liminal: he is impaired, he appears monstrous, and he is located in the margins of the manuscript. What do we do with this compounding marginalization?

To put this another way: Who is this impaired figure represented as, and in the position of, the monster? As we noted, images of disability are rare in this manuscript. Along with our little fellow, there is also an image on folio 297r: of a man—his amputated legs ending in barbed stumpscrawling upon the ground, using a set of hand crutches.44 There is a strong echo between the two figures, strengthened by the colors used: the man’s bright orange clothes recall the monster’s crutches and tongue, and his lavender hat matches the monster’s fur. So, the wounded and disabled are relegated to the margins, almost, but not quite, out of sight. The hybrid grotesques that are usually to be found in such locations in a manuscript prove the outside as imaginative flights of fancy, provocative but always over the horizon.45 To place images of the impaired in the margins, then, is to conjure a fantasy where the wounded and disabled survivors of trauma (injured in war or through the normal ravages of everyday life) are similarly acknowledged but placed comfortably out of reach. This is in strong contradiction to the lived reality of Medieval people. As Carmel Ferreghed writes, “for a whole range of reasons, a large number of people survived in medieval society missing part of their body.” Similarly, the battles of Medieval romance are almost parodically fierce (one need only remember Gawain’s brain-soaked shoulder), and yet images that capture the lingering consequence of that martial intensity are quite literally, here, pushed to the margins. In romance, Tracy argues, “comedy is often the refuge for gratuitous violence where pain is inflicted without any consequence, where an audience can laugh at the discomfort or dysfunction of a person.” Humorous violence is distinct from violence that causes

44Metzler, Disability in Medieval Europe, 155–156.
45For an image of this folio, see https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10000109b.
47Ferreghed, “Wounds, Expectations, and Exper Procedure.”

“revulsion and aversion” because “it is violence without consequence.” The figuration of our guy as a grotesque enact visually what the narrative denies. The main illustrations are entertaining, as is the story, and the case of mistaken identity is at least mildly humorous. They present a world where—except for death—violence marks the body only temporarily. Real life, however, contravenes such a desire. However, our little guy does not go quite so quietly. At first, he seems rather tame, especially compared to the monsters of the text. For instance, in Merlin’s hands, Arthur’s banner seems to come to life, as in “short fire and flames from its throat and such great fires that everyone in King Rion’s army was aghast.” In this way, the prosthetic monster within the story is more lively than the one in the margin. And yet, despite losing a limb, our figure does not look to be in pain, nor does he seem in distress while begging. In fact, his stiff, and stretched tongue seems a provocation, a challenge to be acknowledged. At first glance he seems immobilized, but the crutches, despite the awkward placement of one beneath his leg, signify movement, and we know that the disabled were surprisingly mobile during the Middle Ages, seeking out cures and other treatments. The marginalization of this figure, both spatially and in its representation as a monster, reinforces the liminality of the disabled. But, as Henri-Jacques Stiker notes in his History of Disability, the disabled in the Middle Ages are liminal even to other excluded groups such as Jews or Muslims.

49Tracy, Torture and Brutality, 191–2.
51Tracy and DeVries, “Permuting Medieval Wounds,” 3, note that “The suffering engendered by wounds is not always a facet of medieval naratative. Very often, the pain that accompanies the wound is neither evident nor expressed.”
52Metzler, Disability in Medieval Europe, 127, notes, accounts of individuals with impairments undertaking pilgrimages in the hopes of healing have a clear rhetorical function, but also reveal information about the lives of actual medieval people. “If a miracle collection describes the physical condition of the supplicants at the saint’s shrine or tomb in great detail, mentions the effort they underwent to reach the site of pilgrimage, and finally narrates a spectacular cure, then that makes for wonderful advertising for the powers of that saint. Because of the detail these sources go into, it is possible to extract incidental information about the lived experience of impaired persons, such as what mobility aids they had available to them, or how they made their living.” For extensive discussion of people with impairments seeking “cures” through pilgrimage, see Meridier’s Chap. 5, “Medieval Miracles and Impairment.”
"on the border of other groups that are fairly well recognized."70 Sicker goes on to note that, in contrast to the geographic imaginaries of the Middle Ages that place the monsters far away, "[t]he disabled, the 'monsters' imminent in our society and not in its borders, heighten our fears, because they are already there." Our curious fellow, boldly sticking out his blazing orange tongue, perhaps does not quite heighten our fears, but he demands our attention, demands that we acknowledge him, even from the margins.

"REFLEXIVE CATEGORIES, PRINCIPLES OF CLASSIFICATION, NORMATIVE RULES"

In this collection, we take on the challenge of examining the intersection of the discourses of "disability" and "monstrosity." Bringing these two themes together is a timely and necessary intervention in the current scholarly fields of Disability Studies and Monster Studies, especially in light of the pernicious history of defining people with distinctly non-normative bodies or non-normative cognition as monsters. This collection explores the origins of this confusion, examining the problems and possibilities inherent in it, and casts both disability and monstrosity in the light of emergent, empowering discourse of posthumanism. The chapters collected here do not simply collapse these two categories, but rather look to interrogate the convergence and divergence of the monstrous and the impaired in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period. What is the effect of reading monsters as disabled and the disabled as monstrous? How does the coupling of these two othered groups obscure important features? How does reading them together illuminate the social and cultural processes by which difference is constructed? How do the discourses of monstrosity and disability intersect with recent thinking on the posthuman? The chapters that follow provide several starting points for answering these important questions.

The three main divisions we have created to contain the nuanced chapters in this collection are, like all such divisions, artificial. Most of the chapters might well be placed in more than one category. The subjects at the heart of this collection are by definition defined in easy or fixed categorization. It is our hope that readers might think about alternate groupings for these 15 interrelated chapters.

Our categorical divisions are driven by the way we might approach the figures under discussion. There are "real" phenomena underlying some of the narratives, images, and ideas discussed in this volume, lived experiences for Medieval and Early Modern humans that might serve to connect "us" to "them" through an embodied empathy. We might be able, at times, to diagnose historical figures through modern scientific and medical paradigms, as Armand Marie Leroi does throughout his Mutant: On Generic Variety and the Human Body.71 We now know, for example, which generic sequences trigger hypertrichosis universalis, which is unusually abundant hair growth, sometimes all over the body and face, as was the case for Pedro Gonzalez and his children,72 as well as for the famous sideshow performers Lionel the Lion Faced Boy and Jo Jo the Poodle Man.73 This knowledge, though, does not tell us how to respond to the Gonzalezes or to Lionel and Jo Jo. They are neither inherently monstrous nor in any substantive way impaired. While some have sought "cures" for hypertrichosis (none of which are more effective than shaving, waxing, or laser hair removal), it is only a "disease" in so far as a medical establishment deems it so.

Similarly, "disability," as used in current US law, is not so much a question of medicine as it is of legal precedent and statutes. One person with a given condition might be deemed eligible for disability benefits while another with the same condition might not, since it is the Social Security Administration that makes initial determinations and a judge who adjudicates appeals.74 They consult medical records, but the judgment resides in a legal and bureaucratic rather than a medical sphere.

70Sicker, A History of Disability, 49. Also see Metzler, Disability in Medieval Europe, II. For intersections between medieval Jewish and Disability studies, see Ephraim Shoham-Stern, On the Margins of a Minority: Leperies, Madness, and Disability among the Jews of Medieval Europe, trans. Hans Waxman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014).


In each of these cases—medical and legal—it is a discourse that sets the terms for the discussion and bears a large influence on its outcome. Here, we rely on Michel Foucault’s notion of a discourse, as articulated in his *Archeology of Knowledge*. The discourse in which a conversation is embedded will not only influence the vocabulary of the discussion but also have a large influence on the conclusions drawn. If we examine the same phenomenon though the discourses of US disability law and of evolutionary genetics, we will say different things about the phenomenon and will ultimately reach different conclusions. Looking at the discourses in question reveals the constructedness of both the discourses and the subject of investigation. As Foucault writes, the categories we consider:

...are always themselves reflective categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types; they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analysed beside others....they are not intrinsic, autonomous, and universally recognizable characteristics.  

This is true both of the divisions of this book and of the categories we can observe in the material under discussion.

Our section on “Discourses of Bodily Difference” contains five chapters that grapple with the distinctions between monstrousty and disability through these discourses. First, Kathleen Perry Long’s “From Monstrosity to Postnormality: Montaigne, Canguilhem, Foucault” considers how three influential early modern authors defined the monstrous, and thereby expanded the boundaries of the normative body. Michel de Montaigne held that difference—that is, monstrousty—was the universal condition of humanity rather than an aberration, a notion with potentially wide-ranging consequences. Second, Eliza Buhler’s “If in Other Respects He Appears to be Effectively Human: Defining Monstrosity in Medieval English Law” examines a legal case from 1265 in which William Fltre was found guilty of the murder of Augustine le Ferrer but was pardoned for the crime. Monstrosity and disability press in on the case from both sides: while le Ferrer appeared to be “a terrible monster” and would not respond to greetings, the court found William to be “a natural fool.” This case therefore allows Buhler to untangle the discourses of disability and monstrousty—and therefore the human and the inhuman—in the period. The next chapter is “(Dis)functional Faces: Signs of the Monstrous?” by Emily Cocker and Patricia Skinner. Here, the authors focus on injured, legally disfigured, and disease-altered faces and on the reactions they elicit. Again, the legal and medical cross paths, as faces can be altered by both forces, and a culture’s response to these faces is conditioned by prevailing notions about criminality and sin, as much by notions about health and illness.

Karen Bruce Wallace’s “Grendel and Goliath: Monstrous Superability and Disability in the Old English Corpus” then considers perhaps the two most iconic monsters of the Middle Ages, one from a secular text and the other from a religious text: Grendel from the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* and Goliath, as he appears in *Alfric of Eynam’s Homilies for the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. In both Old English texts, the monsters are described with the term “unthu,” which signifies impairment or disease. What does it mean to reconceptualize Grendel’s difference as impairment? What do we learn if we see Goliath’s height as a disease? Wallace uses these case studies to transform the way that we understand the normative, the monstrous, the disabled, and the superabled in Anglo-Saxon England.

The final chapter in this section, Shyama Rajendran’s “Erasing the Future: Imagining Medieval Reproductive Possibilities and the Monstrosity of Power,” tackles the difficult, interpenetrating issues of race, monstrousness, and disability, as they appear in Medieval sources. Medieval texts express a desire to see otherwise, even when that otherwise is not clearly visible, or not, as in the case of religious difference, a visual phenomenon at all. These texts also tend to “purge” any difference by the end of their narratives. The impairment is miraculously cured; the black-skinned Sultan is converted and simultaneously bleached to white. In reading these narratives, it is difficult to shed the modern discourses of race and disability, which were not operative in the Middle Ages; that said, while Medieval authors did not have the same ideas about race as were later produced in the enlightenment and after, they clearly did have notions about embodied difference, about skin color and normative bodies, and about the generational lines through which they are typically transmitted.

The next division of the volume focuses on “Dis/Identifying the Other.” Each of these chapters hinges on the visibility of difference and on the power that the gaze confers and denies. In his utopian design project, the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham generated a model of total observation of prisoners. He published his concept as a series of letters in 1787, the first of which explains the basic, underlying principle of his design: 

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18 Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 22.
Bentham's vision of the perfect surveillance state—or the illusion thereof—would be alien to people of the Medieval and Early Modern periods. This sort of encompassing vision was seen as the exclusive province of the all-seeing eye of God. However, the collective gaze of a culture is massively powerful. We are all, in a sense, always within the panopticon, always under the normative gaze of those around us. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, argues that, “[t]he Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see, being seen, dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without even seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.” What these chapters strive to do is to see the seeing, to explore how cultures have sought to identify, examine, and display otherness in order to make statements about normativity.

The section opens with Molly Lewis’s “A Bob Child” Revisited: Conflations of Monstrocity, Disability, and Race in *King of Tars,* which examines the convergence of multifold categories of difference in the wondrous and unsettling body of a child born with neither bone, blood, ears, nor a nose. As the monstrous offspring of a “Saracen” and a Christian Princess, the “rond of fleshle” is regularly referenced as the unnatural consequence of miscegenation in the text, and yet, as Lewis observes, scholars regularly disregard the possibility of a non-normative body without blood or bones. By taking seriously the humanity of this child, Lewis reads in this disabled body the potential for resistance to the fears of miscegenation that permeate the text. More than just a symbol of racial mixing, this figure refutes the normativity conjured in the dehumanization of the child into a monstrous blob.

Hayle Swenson turns to an account of the 1381 Peasant’s Revolt to further challenge our ability to arrive at clear, cut final understandings of the identities of others. Her “Attending to ‘Beasts Irrational’ in Gower’s *Twa Aglie:*” reconsiders Gower’s dehumanizing language, through which he casts the peasants as farm animals. She resists the easy condemnation of this strategy and instead finds an element of resistance—intentional or otherwise—to conventional norms of embodiment. Swenson recovers from Gower’s text a model for viewing all living beings not as mere representatives of an imposed category but instead as unique individuals. This raises an important challenge to normativity itself.

Spencer Weisreich continues the investigation of the role of the visual in Medieval narratives of race and difference. His “How a Monster Means: The Significance of Bodily Difference in the Christopher Cynecephalus Tradition” carefully examines the Latin vita of St. Christopher, finding that author used visibility of the cynecephalus saint’s difference within their narratives to convey meanings. The vita is clear in the assertion that his dog head is not the result of a singular prodigal birth. Rather, it states that he comes “from the dog headed kind.” This transforms and expands his didactic function, such that his non-normative body becomes an embodiment of the asserted normativity of Christianity. While the majority of these chapters are concerned with unsettling and visible physical difference, Sonia Freeman Lofthus turns to the interrogation of mental disability and monstrocity and the dangers of invisible difference. Her “Lycanthropy and Lunacy: Cognitive Disability in *The Duchess of Malfi*” examines the conflation of monstrocity, illicit desires, disability, and social class. Identity in the play proves to be highly unstable and changeable—narratives that should be rigid (such as aristocr/servant) are instead permeated with confusion, thereby challenging the deterministic social structures of the plot. Ferdinand’s “fire on the inside” further raises the specter that his embodied difference is not exceptional, but could instead be camouflaged by anyone. With “mobility” being a social construct in the play, predisposed upon blood and behavior, Lofthus argues that this normative structure is grounded in dangerously shifting identity categories.
Leah Pope Parker explores the abberance of the body in Medieval Christianity. Her "Ethnology for Cannibals: A System of Aberrance in the Old English Andreas" interrogates the vulnerable and aberrant bodies of saints in order to understand the aberrance of all Medieval bodies. Through her readings of texts from the Old English Martyrology and Albrec's Lives of Saints, Pope Parker finds an invitation, within portrayals of the same body, to address the absence of "disability" in the Middle Ages. Drawing on ideas of the "supercorp" and of "superability," Pope Parker locates a sense of embodied enablement within the suffering bodies of the martyrs and the marriageable. This juxtaposition of impairment and ability reveals a narrative framework for understanding bodily difference that valorizes heroic suffering even while it allows for empowerment. Finally, Melissa Geff's "The Monstrous Womb of Early Modern Midwifery Manuals" examines how images of conjoined twins in Thomas Raynald's The Birth of Manlynde (1540), the earliest English-language midwifery manual, both construct and challenge notions of normativity.

The following division of this collection explores the risks and pleasures of "Queer Couplings." Where the previous sections interrogate the constructions of normativity and of difference, this section directly engages with the generative potentials of how disability queers discursive and epistemological frameworks. Robert McRuer, for instance, articulates the possibilities of non-normative bodies through a delineation of "compulsory able-bodiedness," a fundamental concept for the chapters gathered in this section. He traces the arc of "compulsory able-bodiedness" alongside "compulsory heterosexuality," both being majoritarian frameworks that reproduce the normative in terms of the body and of sexual desire.

However, he observes that, "precisely because these systems depend on a queer/disabled existence that can never quite be contained, able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony is always in danger of being disrupted." Though "compulsory able-bodiedness" aims to reproduce only those bodies that reinforce normativity, normative bodies often gain recognition and integrity through interaction with the queer and the disabled. Queer/disabled existence is siphoned off into bodies that can be easily excluded or isolated, but that also have the power to disrupt. By bringing together queer and cripp theory, McRuer intends to further exacerbate the crisis not fully acknowledged in these compulsory systems. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes in a review essay,

"Queer cripp and queer theory understand the disruptive power of difficult, dangerous pleasures and their intimacy to the dematerialization of social segregations. They recognize that our world has always been and still always remain complicated, closed, heterogeneous, and unstable—and they seek futures more livable than those yet imagined." Like the queer and the cripp, the monstrous troubles the promise of any closed system. The chapters in this section, therefore, constitute these three critical terms in order to read the potentialities of embodied difference.

This section opens with John Garrison's "Blindness and Posthuman Sexuality in Paradiso Lost." Taking as his starting point the monstrous depiction of Sin and her progeny in Book II, and following McRuer, Garrison argues that Satan's forgetting of his siring of Sin and Death represents the normative drive to remember only the heterosocial and able-bodied, to repress knowledge of the queerer couplings and the resultant non-normative bodies such encounters reproduce. Garrison's reading of the poem, however, complicates this initial linking of monstrosity and disability with illicit and secret desires, where many discussions of disability in the poem center upon the negative valences of Milton's blindness, he describes the broader implications of sightlessness. Milton's trope of blindness extends beyond moral judgment and failing, encompassing the posthuman future of men in the form of the angels, whose state man can share in through obedience to God. When the angels in Paradiso Lost engage in sexual activity, their bodies become totally mixed, making visual recognition impossible, and not necessary for identifying desirable bodies. Finally, Alan Montross draws together contemporary Disability Studies, Queer Studies, and new materialist approaches in order to uncover the materiality of embodied difference. His "Dwelling Underground in The Book of John Mandeville: Monstrosity, Disability, Ecology" explores how environments imprint themselves upon the bodies of the non-normative. Specifically, this chapter reads how the cave impresses its lithic materiality upon its denizens, such as the troglodytes of Trapezia. These cave dwellers exist outside of civilization, looking like storks rather than speaking in the

tongues of man, and they care not for gold or silver (or other objects of human economies) and instead only desire a precious stone that has 60 colors. Monstrosity finds in these bodies, shaped by and for their ethic environments, subjects for Medieval disability scholarship. Moreover, their queer bodies and behavior accord with how contemporary disabled people are represented. In bringing together several contemporary discourses that treat of embodied difference, he locates a Medieval idea of disability without eliding the differences between Medieval monsters and modern disabled subjects.

**Monstrosity, Disability, and Magic**

Several of the chapters gathered here focus on the constructions of and the inherent instability within binaries of normal/aberrant, disabled/healthy, monstrous/human (Robere, Wallace, Loftis, Pope, Swenson). Not having any ontological status themselves, the categories of “disabled” and “monstrous” are fictions, fantasies of a desire to remain normal, healthy, human. What is most important, however, is not that categories of othersisms are revealed to be constructions, but that their reference point proves to be more shifting, less definable than discursive frameworks suggest or hope. On one hand, as McRuer would remind us, “able-bodied status is always temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough.” And on the other, as Patricia MacCormack argues in “Posthuman Teratology,” if the term “monster” is defined as a deviation from some normal state, then “we are all, and must be monsters because nothing is ever like another thing, nor like itself from one moment to the next.” Far from being abject or cast out, the bodies of embodied difference are not limited to negative examples but rather serve as vehicles for identification, reconfiguring what it means to be human (Weinreich, Pope). By rejecting “human” as a binary term in opposition to bodies otherwise, the authors assembled here illuminate so many more available modes of premortem embodied existence than can be encompassed by hierarchical and fixed categories (Lewis, Garnson, Monstrosity).

Another connecting thread to the chapters in this collection, then, loops around the words “transhuman,” “posthuman,” and “supercorp” or “superability.” Julie Singer, in her “Toward a Transhuman Model of Medieval Disability,” eschews the prevailing vocabularies of contemporary Disability Studies that continue to reinforce binary thinking, such as impairment/disability, instead advocating for a “freer recognition that the disabled are undeniably human . . . yet they are also something else.” In this model, “disability can be read as an enhancement, as an addition rather than a diminution of capacities.” Similar to Marvel’s Daredevil who gains heightened senses as a consequence of losing his sight, some premodern supercorps gain enlightenment, holiness, and physical ability, as a trade-off for their perceived impairment (Wallace, Pope, Monstrosity). While discursive and social strategies to cordon off non-normative bodies work to fix the boundaries of the category of “human,” these attempts ultimately reveal that the borders between normal and aberrant are instead so permeable as to not properly exist. MacCormack argues that the posthuman “allows access to and celebrates the excesses, comundrums, jubilant failures, and disruptive events which are already inherent in any possibility of contemplation,” and the chapters in this volume follow in this celebration. We close this introduction with one final “jubilant failure” to consider. In the last decades of the seventeenth century, a German woman gave birth to a male child who, in his own words, was a “wonderful Little Man of but 29 Inches high, born without Hands, Feet, or Thighs, June the 2nd, 1674” (Fig. 1.5). His parents named him Matthias Buchinger and were, he tells us, “distressed at his unusual form,” and so they “concealed him as much as possible.” Unlike the marginal figure from the Story of Merlin, Buchinger’s unusual body did not result from injuries; also, unlike the marginal figure, Buchinger was a real, living human being. These two figures, though, intersect not only in the abridgment of limbs. When Buchinger attempted to display himself publicly in Nuremberg in 1708, he advertised himself as “a monster without hands or feet.” He was denied permission to perform on this occasion but went on to an illustrious career, performing astonishing feats for the kings, queens, and com-

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65Ibid., 9.
A handbill advertising a 1726 London performance declares of "The greatest German living," with a sideshow barker's vigor:

The Tricks he plays at Cups and Balls,
Tis wrong in any Man, who calls,
Their Slight of Hand, as he gives out,
Their Slight of Stumps, and are no Doubt ...
Great Trunk of Man be not ashamed,
That Nature has thy Body in mind ... 
Among them all we cannot spy
A Hand, or Foot, a Leg, or Thigh
The Oak could not the Throes bear
Thall that the Branches cropped were,
Nor would thy Fame have been so great,
Had Nature form'd thee quite compleat.73

Buchinger celebrated his own prestidigitations, but there is a far more powerful piece of slight of hand trickery that is chronicled in this volume: the often-unsaid, unseen, faster than the eye cultural processes that generate normativity through the creation, examination, objectification, and denigration of human beings and the bodies they inhabit by birth, by injury, by illness, or by choice. But this is a pedestrian conjuring trick, the creation of a normative body out of the rejection of other bodies as non-normative. The real magic was Buchinger's. As Lois Bragg writes:

A further premise is not widely assumed in disability studies, though it should be ... that human societies, while perforce selecting their outcomes in the process of defining their norms, may regard those misfits not with fear, scorn, or impatience, as we do, but with awe.74

Buchinger's contemporaries clearly viewed him with awe, as well they should have. In addition to performing actual magic tricks and card tricks, playing numerous musical instruments, dancing, bowling ninepins, performing trick-shots with a pistol and rifle, building miniature models in bottles, and marrying four times (fathering 14 children, as recorded in a family tree that,

73Im, Matthias Buchinger, 122.
naturally, he drew), Buchinger was a calligrapher. He specialized in micro-calligraphy, using minuscule, nearly microscopic letters and words to form images. They defy all but the closest inspection. Surely, there is an echo in Buchinger’s reputation in various forms throughout his promotional materials of his status as a “wonderful Little Man of but 29 Inches high” and his practicing multiple miniature arts. Through his body and his many arts, Buchinger fashioned himself as at once less and more than his contemporaries. Mark Singer, writing for The New Yorker, follows this lead by saying, “He was twenty-nine inches tall yet manifestly a giant.” Surely, in a rare case of truth in handbook advertising, Buchinger did not exaggerate when he claimed “This little Man performs such Wonders as have never been done by any but Himself” (see Fig. 1.5). Buchinger’s drawings were, at the time we composed this introduction, on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in an exhibition titled “Wordplay: Matthias Buchinger’s Drawings from the Collection of Ricky Jay”—another magician. Ken Johnson writes in his review of the show:

“I was not aware that Matthias Buchinger was a calligrapher. He specialized in micro-calligraphy, using minuscule, nearly microscopic letters and words to form images. They defy all but the closest inspection. Surely, there is an echo in Buchinger’s reputation in various forms throughout his promotional materials of his status as a “wonderful Little Man of but 29 Inches high” and his practicing multiple miniature arts. Through his body and his many arts, Buchinger fashioned himself as at once less and more than his contemporaries. Mark Singer, writing for The New Yorker, follows this lead by saying, “He was twenty-nine inches tall yet manifestly a giant.” Surely, in a rare case of truth in handbook advertising, Buchinger did not exaggerate when he claimed “This little Man performs such Wonders as have never been done by any but Himself” (see Fig. 1.5). Buchinger’s drawings were, at the time we composed this introduction, on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in an exhibition titled “Wordplay: Matthias Buchinger’s Drawings from the Collection of Ricky Jay”—another magician. Ken Johnson writes in his review of the show:

It’s a testament to the quality of his works that they would be gripping to behold even if you didn’t know of his disabilities. But to ensure that viewers would fully appreciate his achievements, he typically signed them with some variation of “Matthias Buchinger, born without hands or feet.”

Here, we see the push and pull of this artist and performer: he is not remarkable despite his unusual body—his micrography is remarkable when judged against any scale, and it is conceivable that without his particular limbs, he might not have been able or inspired to produce it—and yet, in his efforts at showmanship, he constantly referred to his “disability.” The walls that divide the monstrous, the disabled, the posthuman, and the wonderful are made, like Buchinger’s images, of mountains of words, and of quicksilver, and of magic.