

The Monk's Tale

The *Monk's Tale*: Disability/Ability

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Introduction

In order to understand how the *Monk's Tale* helps us explore what disability means for Chaucer's readers (and for us reading Chaucer in the present), we must start with the famously varied bodies that populate the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*. The *General Prologue* opens by presenting to the audience a world where everybody (and every body) is different. The fictional pilgrimage is a remarkably mixed assortment of people who have fallen together by random chance: "sondry folk, by aventure yfalle" (GP 25). Hailing from a range of social backgrounds (profession, rank, class), Chaucer's fictive travelers are also diverse in age, gender, sexuality, physical appearance, and health. As befits a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket (where a medieval pilgrim could seek healing for sickness or give thanks for prior recovery), these characters display great variety in bodily "condicioun" (38). Before the "story" of the Canterbury pilgrimage begins in earnest, Chaucer's narrator primes the audience to attend carefully to how bodies differ, and he invites us to speculate on the relationship between perceived external features of a body and the inner life of (or symbolic meaning for) any given character.

Not only does Chaucer ask his audience to consider the significance of any body's discernable features, but he also stresses that all bodies are variable and mutable. All of the pilgrims must be agile enough to move and travel from their disparate points of origin and continue along the pilgrimage route—but Chaucer is not clear on how the pilgrims' individual motivations for travel might actually relate to their divergent conditions. Some may have been "seke" (sick, ill, impaired, or diseased) in the past but have since fully recovered, while others might still be experiencing some kind of "seke" condition (whether or not it is disclosed to the audience) and they "seeke" aid as a consequence (17-18). Other pilgrims might be content at home in their usual or distinctive bodies and might not seek to be changed at all.

Whether or not the precise physical condition of each pilgrim or motivation for travel can be determined, the *General Prologue* establishes Chaucer's fascination with "[d]iverse folk" and bodily variety (RvP 3857). The sheer range of narrators and narrative material throughout the ensuing *Tales* suggests Chaucer's abiding curiosity about the different ways people can appear, speak, act, think, feel, and move. Throughout the *General Prologue* itself, the apparent randomness of Chaucer's pilgrim portraits invites the audience to consider if there is any

standard against which all these bodies could be measured. Can any particular body in this pilgrimage be deemed “normal” or “ideal” in the first place?

When you read a pilgrim portrait, there is often a distinctive feature that sets the character apart from the rest of the travelers. In many cases, such distinctive personal traits can be associated with what we might now call disability, deformity, or physical impairment. One of the first things we learn about the Wife of Bath, for instance, is that she is hard of hearing or “somdel deaf” (GP 446). The Cook has a “mormal” (open sore or ulcer) on his shin (386). The Summoner’s face exhibits a distasteful, incurable, and socially-isolating skin condition (628-33). The Pardoner’s physical features—such as a high voice and beardlessness—suggest an ambiguous gender presentation and indeterminate sexuality (687-91). What stories can be told about Chaucer’s interest in embodied variability? What does bodily variance actually mean?

When embodied variance is placed at the center of the fictional Canterbury pilgrimage, the *General Prologue* becomes a fascinating setup for the extended rhetorical performance by the Monk. This compilation of “stories,” like the *Tales* writ large, draws from disparate sources: biblical, classical, and contemporary (medieval) episodes—and it is Chaucer’s most sustained experiment in thinking through the varied meanings of disability in narrative form. The Monk offers brief “tragedies” (MkP 1971) with each “storie” relating the account of someone “yfallen out of heigh degree / Into myserie” and a dismal end (1976-77). As he recounts a range of stories about great people brought down in tragic ways, the Monk presents—seemingly by accident—a verse anthology of disability narratives. Mighty Sampson is struck blind (MkT 2027-30); King Antiochus contracts an “incurable” disease (2600) and is rendered immobile after a road accident (2610-14); Nebuchadnezzar temporarily experiences an impaired mental state that inhibits his capacity to rule (2170-78). Through the Monk’s performance, the audience encounters a range of conditions and embodied states that we might now consider disabilities (physical, sensory, or cognitive), and the meanings he assigns to these bodily features shifts from story to story.

Tools

The Monk’s performance—deemed boring by generations of readers—becomes quite compelling if it is used as a tool for uncovering some of the varied attitudes toward disability and bodily impairment in Chaucer’s day. It might seem from a first reading of these dreadful tales that the Monk views disability in itself as tragic, implying that anyone who experiences some disability, deformity, or disease is doomed to an unfortunate outcome. When taken as a whole, the Monk’s “stories” do not actually offer any coherent moral message or lesson about bodily impairment. Rather, his divergent narratives of embodied difference suggest capacious social meanings associated with external markers of disability in Chaucer’s day. In an influential reading of disability as “narrative prosthesis,” literary theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder observe that “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytic insight” (49). In literary narratives, disability often works as a tool or “crutch” (prop) to advance a storyteller’s purpose, and “stories” tend not to be interested in relating lived experiences and social conditions of people living with disabilities but rather in exploring what a disabled person might represent symbolically. Mitchell and Snyder maintain that disability in a “storie” often exists only to be

cured or corrected, and a disabled person can vanish from a narrative (or the narrative simply ends) once his or her rhetorical function has been served.

Beyond the theory of “narrative prosthesis,” there are many other important “thinking tools” (or conceptual models) that scholars and students can use in order to examine disability in Chaucer’s work or in literature more generally. For instance, a “medical model” approaches disability as a divergence from a perceived norm that needs the body to be “set right” or cured. A “social model” acknowledges that individuals may have various impairments that they experience, but it stresses that disability is only caused when a society excludes or fails to accommodate people, regardless of whatever differences they may display. A “religious model” deems disability a sign of divine punishment or a challenge caused by an external force that signals sin or provokes acts of pity and charity (Godden and Hsy). What we shall see upon a close reading of a few of the Monk’s “tragedies” is that no one theory (tool or model) can completely explain the operations of any given story that the Monk relates. In some cases, disability does appear to signify divine punishment (Antiochus, as we shall see in the next section, is explicitly punished by God for his pride), but in other cases disability is just due to “bad luck” (that is, the whims of random Fortune). It is ultimately up to the reader to grapple with the question of what disability might mean in any given case.

Text

In this section, we shall see that few of the Monk’s “stories” fall into a pattern of disability awaiting cure or disappearance (to use Mitchell and Snyder’s theory of narrative prosthesis). The Monk often does not resolve disability into a cure (if anything, the *persistence* of disability is the point), and the Monk invests much of his time and energy in relating how his protagonists find ways to adapt to—or even thrive within—their unexpectedly nonstandard bodies. Mighty Sampson, for instance, is blinded by his enemies in an effort to humiliate and subjugate him (MkT 2070), but he patiently exploits his perceived weakness to gain entry into his enemies’ temple and tears down two pillars, thus, slaying all his foes (2080-86). Although Sampson kills himself in this final act of vengeance, the blindness itself never disappears. He exploits his blindness long enough to achieve his goals and destroys the environment that created his disability in the first place.

The fact some of the Monk’s narratives would display unexpected narrative strategies of living with disability is perhaps surprising since the Monk’s stature is explicitly framed in terms of *ability*. As the Chaucerian narrator states: “A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie, / An outridere, that lovede venerie, / A manly man, to been an abbot able” (GP 165-67). In the Monk’s portrait, masculine power is aligned with ability: “maistrie” over nonhuman animals, freedom to ride and hunt, and the will to assert power (“to ben an abbot able”). In many of the “stories” the Monk relates (such as the story of Sampson), a high-status “able” male is thwarted or “falls” precisely through physical impairment. However, the discursive “lesson” to be learned from the disability-as-downfall is not always clear.

The conceptual framework offered by Mitchell and Snyder (the concept of narrative prosthesis) offers one useful tool for interpreting the *Monk’s Tale*, and the medieval story compendium allows us to test out how well the theory works across time. Two “stories” within the Monk’s

performance are illustrative as contrasting case studies: the tale of King Antiochus and the tale of Queen Zenobia.

The “storie” of King Antiochus would seem to conform most strongly to the theory of narrative prosthesis. In the first stanza, the narrator states the king is punished for “[h]is hye pride, his werkes venymus” and the book of “Machabee” adds that because of his “proude wordes ... he fil fro heigh prosperitee” and “wrecchedly he deyde” (MkT 2577-582). At first, God smites him “soore smoot / With invisible wounde, ay incurable” (2599-2600), but his *real* fall from grace is, quite literally, *a fall*:

God daunted al his pride and al his boost.
For he so soore fil out of his char
That it his limes and skyn totar,
So that he neyther myghte go ne ryde,
But in a chayer men aboute hym bar,
Al forbrused, bothe bak and syde. (2609-14).

Antiochus’ fall has an irreversible effect on his physical mobility, as he must now be transported by means of a “chayer” (chair, chariot, or wheeled device). Here, a conspicuously powerful and “able” man is severely limited in his mobility, “un-able” to hunt or to ride as before. Broken limbs—as well as an internal, incurable condition—signal a divine punishment for pride.

Elsewhere in his performance, the Monk ascribes agency to Fortune *rather* than God’s will—and such episodes dramatically revise a religious master narrative that unambiguously posits disability as an external punishment for sin or pride. Fortune ultimately implicates random chance rather than a clear “master plan,” and Fortune itself (herself) cuts across many different cultural and religious orientations (Christian, Jewish, and pagan worlds; Babylonian, Greek, Roman, and Persian contexts). In the cases where random Fortune is pegged as the cause of one’s downfall, it is less clear whether one should read disability as a punishment at all. Throughout the *Monk’s Tale*, individual “stories” convey a conspicuous plurality of masculine capacities, and they suggest overlapping and discordant meanings associated with what we might now consider disability (blindness, limited mobility, cognitive or intellectual impairment, and incurable disease).

Although the Antiochus “storie” offers a clear case of disability as narrative prosthesis (God uses it to bring down a high-status male for his pride), a less settled use of disability informs the tale of the Monk’s only *female* protagonist, Zenobia. The powerful Queen of Palmyra curiously begins her life as the social equivalent of a high-status male. She hunts and shows her “maistrie” over beasts: “So worthy was in armes and so keene/ That no wight passed hire in hardynesse” (2249-50). Lions, leopards, and bears are “torente...in hir armes” (2261-62). Such masculine strength extends and anticipates her military and political might: “Ther myghte no thyng in hir armes stonde” (2268). Just as she exhibits quintessentially masculine attributes of power and ability, she displays virtues of masculine self-control. She desires to flee the “Office of wommen” and keep “hir maydenhod” (2256-69), yet the *one* exception she makes is for the purposes of procreation. That is, she agrees to the absolute *minimal* amount of sexual intercourse possible in order to produce two male heirs (2279-96).

In this narrative, it is not God but Fortune who brings down the protagonist: “Fortune out of hir regne made hire falle / To wrecchednesse and to mysaventure” (2349-50). The Roman Aurelian (appearing out of nowhere in this narrative, arbitrarily summoned by the narrator’s invocation of Fortune) suddenly conquers Zenobia. He appropriates her golden chariot (“Hir chaar, that was with gold wrought” [2360]), enters into Rome in triumph, and forces her to walk before this vehicle as if she is a beast of burden, in “gilte cheynes on hire nekke hangynge” (2364). In the tale of Antiochus, disability serves quite explicitly as narrative prosthesis. God renders Antiochus immobile by causing him to fall from his chariot, and Antiochus must now rely upon a type of assistive technology, a humble “chaar” that propels him. At the end of the Zenobia story, an ostentatious golden chariot—repurposed by the new “man in charge” (the Roman Aurelian)—transforms the female protagonist into a material object or physical device. Fettered to her former chariot—and presumably granting it motion—Zenobia now acts as if she were an animal yoked to a cart; she now acts as a material extension of her conqueror’s wheeled “chaar,” and her physical strength becomes socially humiliating rather than empowering.

In the Monk’s “storie” of Zenobia, we find a “double standard” that disrupts the pattern of masculine hyper-ability punished by disability. Zenobia is an “honorary man” in the Classical sense—she exhibits mastery over the body and regulating all emotion and desires, as well demonstrating military prowess and an ability to conquer men and beasts. Yet an implicit lesson that this “storie” transmits is that these qualities—while praiseworthy in a high-status man—cannot be sustained if enacted by a woman.

As harshly as the Monk condemns her, Zenobia cannot entirely be assimilated back into conventional social and gender norms. Zenobia’s womanly features cannot be described through any courtly blazon (the narrator states “I seye nat that she hadde mooste fairnesse, / But of hir shap she myghte nat been amended” (2253-54), and, just as her body evades traditional modes of poetic description, Zenobia resists transforming herself into a passive object of male desire. As a young woman, she “kepte hir maydenhod from every wight” and “deigned [to no man] for to be bonde” (2269-70); during her marriage, she alone determines when and how often she will have sex with her husband (2279-90). Zenobia does undergo an important physical transformation into conventionally gendered attire in her tale’s final stanza: instead of a helmet, she wears a womanly headdress; instead of a scepter, she bears a spinning distaff (2370-2374). Although the external markers of her physical body have now been transformed, the memory of her former strength and power persists in the narrator’s rhetoric: “she that helmed was in starke stoures / And wan by force townes stronge and toures” (2370-2371). As much as the Monk attempts to reincorporate Zenobia’s body into a perceived norm, her body resists that normalizing process.

A comparative reading of the Monk’s “stories” of King Antiochus and Queen Zenobia forces us to rethink the notion of disability’s stability as a cultural sign. The theory of disability as narrative prosthesis helps to explain much of the tale of King Antiochus, who is rendered immobile through divine punishment—but such a disability paradigm wavers considerably in the narrative of Queen Zenobia. Zenobia’s final humiliation, first of all, is facilitated not by any purposeful God, but by an arbitrary Fortune—and the fact that her downfall transpires through the actions of a secular ruler and not by some cosmic higher power suggests the earthbound social forces through which nonstandard bodies get disciplined. Extraordinary modes of embodiment—like Zenobia’s—are only awkwardly shaped into a conventional cultural form.

What lessons do the Monk's disparate "tragedies" relate? This comparative analysis of the two "stories" of Antiochus and Zenobia effectively tests the limits of one tool for thought: the theory of disability as a "narrative prosthesis" derived from Mitchell and Snyder. While it is tempting to view the Monk's "stories" through a religious framework with many a "tragedie" relating a moral lesson, a close reading of any particular "storie" reveals that even a "religious" model cannot fully encapsulate the nuanced messages that narratives convey about some experience of disability.

The lessons and narrative perspectives that disability provides shift alongside the mutability of the body and its movement across shifting environments. In a useful work of rhetorical analysis, disability theorist and rhetoric scholar Jay T. Dolmage discusses "disability myths" (pervasive stories about disability) that reoccur throughout Western literary history. Contextualizing such stories as "stereotypes and tropes," Dolmage notes that "disability myths ... mark and construct disability as surplus, improper, lesser, or otherwise *other*—and none of them actually directly defines what 'normal' is ... In this way, these myths reach into all bodies, yet they also very particularly structure roles for people with disabilities" (Dolmage 31). Since the rhetorical function of disability is malleable and changes depending on context, longstanding "disability myths" only *seem* unchanging across time. Such myths—including those that circulate throughout the Monk's performance, and the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole—can be readily challenged through careful close reading and probing cultural analysis.

Transformation

Activities for thinking further about disability and Chaucer's work:

1. Compare any pilgrim portrait in the text of the *General Prologue* to the illustration in the fifteenth-century (c. 1410) Ellesmere manuscript. (Pilgrim portraits are available online http://liu.cwp.libguides.com/archives_and_special_collections/chaucer with high-resolution images of the Ellesmere at the *Digital Scriptorium*: <http://vm136.lib.berkeley.edu/BANC/digitalscriptorium/news/ellsmere.html>.) What features of the verbal portrait provided by Chaucer carry over into the medieval illustrator's portrayal? What elements of the visual portrait exceed or diverge from Chaucer's textual description? Consider how the medieval illustrator adapts the verbal description of any given body into a new visual medium (graphic art). Does the change in artistic medium transform your understanding of the body under consideration?
2. The surviving "miracle windows" of Canterbury Cathedral, created stained glass in the late twelfth-century, depict a number of "miracle stories" where ordinary people from all walks of life visit the shrine of Thomas Becket and find themselves cured (Raybin 2016, Koopmans). The function of Becket's shrine at Canterbury (as a site of healing and thanksgiving) is famously suggested by rhyme of "seke" and "seeke" in Chaucer's *General Prologue* (GP 19-20), and selected images of the Canterbury miracle windows that are now available online (<http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/the-miracles-at-canterbury/>) indicate that certain forms of disability (including associated objects such as crutches, carts, and other mobility instruments) were visibly prominent in the medieval architecture of Canterbury Cathedral (Metzler 108). How does the medieval architectural context of Canterbury inform your understanding of disability throughout the Canterbury project?

Interpretive questions:

1. The “tragedies” in the *Monk’s Tale* are written in a form that Chaucer uses nowhere else in the *Canterbury Tales*: stanzas of eight pentameter (five-stress) lines with a fixed rhyme scheme of ababbcbc. Despite this fixed form, the “stories” vary widely in their length—and while the Monk *could* recount “an hundred” (MkP 1972) such tales, he falls far short. How does poetic form of this performance relate to its discussion of disability?
2. Is the *Monk’s Tale* one tale or many?
3. In reading the *Monk’s Tale* and the *Canterbury Tales*, the audience encounters a range of bodies, minds, and perspectives. Every Chaucer classroom, in turn, features students who have a range of capacities. For instance, English might not some students’ first language; English-speaking students may have varying levels of comfort with Middle English; some students (regardless of cultural background) may have no experience reading medieval literature; and all students have divergent learning styles, reading paces, and modes of accessing texts (in print, online, or other media). How can reading Chaucer make instructors and students more attentive to a varied student body?
4. It could be argued that *the Monk’s Tale* (a mixed collection of stories from disparate sources) is a microcosm for the entire *Canterbury Tales* project. How do the Monk’s considerations of ability, debility, potential, and variance augment the “diversitee” of the *Tales* as a whole?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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Koopmans, Rachel. *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

Metzler, Irina. “Have Crutch, Will Travel: Disabled People on the Move in Medieval Europe.” *Travels and Mobilities in the Middle Ages: From the Atlantic to the Black Sea*, Edited by Marianne O’Doherty and Felicitas Schmeider. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015, 91-117.

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