

A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages

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Author:

Irina Metzler

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Katherine Harvey

Until Irina Metzler published her first volume on medieval disability in 2006 [\(1\)](#), the lives of the physically impaired in the Middle Ages had received relatively little scholarly attention. Happily, in the past seven years the body of literature on this topic has increased substantially, and now includes a number of monographs [\(2\)](#) and several essay collections.[\(3\)](#) In addition, Metzler herself has now produced a second volume, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment*, in which she sets out to explore the social and cultural factors which affected the lives of medieval crippled, deaf, mute and blind people through a detailed examination of four key themes: ‘Law’, ‘Work’, ‘Ageing’ and ‘Charity’.

Chapter one (‘Law’) examines the interrelationship between disability and the law. Particular attention is given to the significance of the use of mutilation as a punishment. Such practices had great impact on those who were unfortunate enough to receive such penalties for their crimes: besides the obvious physical suffering, their injuries served as a permanent reminder of their criminal status, and thus limited the potential for their reintegration into society. But the use of such corporal punishments also had wider social repercussions; by this means the disabled body came to be associated with the criminal body, and thus the notion that an individual’s physical characteristics were representative of his or her moral qualities was reinforced. In practical terms, this meant that those who were disabled for other reasons were sometimes obliged to go to extraordinary lengths to prove that they were not criminals.

In chapter two (‘Work’), Metzler first examines the role of work as a cause of disability. Soldiers were most

obviously vulnerable to work-related injuries, and the dangers of riding meant that messengers were also peculiarly vulnerable to accidents. Construction workers were often paid more if they were required to work at a height, due to the risk of falls, and medieval people also recognised that individuals who worked with chemicals or fire (for example apothecaries and some artisans) were vulnerable to injury. The consequence of such injuries was often unemployment and poverty, and thus Metzler also investigates the forms of support which were available to the disabled. Guilds (both parish and craft based) were significant in this respect, although there were limits to their role: such associations were intended to support short-term or terminal illness, not prolonged retirement, and some refused to admit disabled members. Employers might also take some responsibility for employees who were injured in their service, and more prosperous individuals might purchase monastic corrodies.

The second portion of chapter two focuses on the work of the disabled. Metzler draws attention to the changing nature of work in the later Middle Ages (in particular the rise of payment by the hour, and the movement of labour from home to the workplace), and suggests that this may have impacted on the ability of the disabled to find work. The theory is plausible, but Metzler struggles to find evidence to support it. Her exploration of the types of work performed by the physically impaired rests on firmer evidence, in particular a pair of case studies. The agricultural labour of the disabled appears to have focused on gleaning. In late medieval England, at least, this was a job reserved for the poor, elderly, and impaired, and manorial bylaws ensured that no-one capable of reaping was allowed to glean. The role of the disabled as fools, dwarfs and 'wonders' is also examined. Evidence for disabled people carrying out other types of work seems limited, although the chapter ends with the intriguing story of two students of 'exceptionally small stature' who incepted at Oxford University in the mid-15th century.

Chapter three ('Ageing') considers the disabling effect of the physical and mental changes experienced by the medieval elderly – changes which were widely viewed in a negative light. Metzler argues that it was not old age itself, but changing physical and mental capacities which conveyed special status on the elderly. Furthermore, the modern notion of retirement as a time for rest and relaxation had yet to be invented; medieval people usually only stopped work when their health was in serious decline. However, far more people lived into old age than has often been assumed, and many of them needed some form of care and support. Whilst the wealthy could rely on their property to provide them with income, and their servants to look after their basic needs, the elderly poor might find themselves in a rather more precarious position. Children sometimes took responsibility for their parents, but support might also come from guilds, charity or former employers (including pensions). Unsurprisingly, there was often conflict over who was responsible for supporting a particular individual, and certain social groups (including former mercenaries and widows) were especially vulnerable to neglect.

Unemployment and poverty were not the only problems faced by the elderly. Certain social groups were obliged to work when they were no longer capable of doing so, with the expectation that clergymen would remain in office until death being particularly problematic in this respect. Very few priests were allowed to resign, and consequently some became something of an embarrassment to the church; many others were forced to rely on coadjutors and curates. Medieval thinkers recognised that old age was a difficult time for many, as a time of suffering, and that many people longed for the release of death. With this in mind, Metzler also explores the problem of mental disability in the elderly, focusing on dementia and depression. Particularly moving are the sad tales of despairing elderly men and women who committed suicide. There was, however, a great variety of experience amongst the medieval elderly: some old people remained fit, healthy and active, whilst others suffered greatly.

The importance of recognising this wide variation of experience is reiterated at the beginning of chapter four ('Charity'), when Metzler reminds the reader that whilst the physically impaired were often recipients of charity, not all disabled people were poor. The chapter opens with an outline of medieval understandings of and motivations for charity, before proceeding to a study of the physically impaired as recipients of charity. Ecclesiastical definitions of those in need of charity usually included the sick, the crippled and the blind. Those who were seriously physically impaired were virtually encouraged to beg, and were almost always included in the category of legitimate beggars. They were thus largely protected from the late medieval

clampdown on begging, which was chiefly motivated by a concern to prevent the greedy and idle from feigning disability in order to receive alms. Such fraudulent beggars provoked both fear and hostility, and legislation was used to limit their activities. Yet even the genuinely disabled were not immune from criticism, and some 15th-century authors argued that even the very disabled could and should find work.

This is a very wide-ranging study, encompassing a vast chronological span (from the fifth to the 16th centuries) and a significant geographical range (taking in much of Western Europe). Whilst this approach allows Metzler to draw on a wide range of material, it is not without problems, not least that it inevitably conceals many of the regional and chronological variation which must surely have existed. The distribution of the source material used suggests that the author is far more familiar with some bodies of material (particularly that relating to later medieval England) than with others, and in some ways a study which was more tightly focused (both in terms of period and area) might have been more fruitful. The grouping together of all types of physical impairment is to an extent unavoidable, but again produces generalisations: the experiences of disabled individuals must have varied substantially according to the exact nature of their disability.

In her conclusion, Metzler draws attention to two areas which reviewers of her first book suggested should have received more attention: the question of gender, and the distinction between disability and illness. Both areas are given some consideration in this book, but this reader at least would have liked to see a more detailed case for why she considers these themes to be relatively insignificant; a longer explanation (perhaps in the introduction, rather than at the end of the book) would have been helpful. Some consideration of disability in relation to the lifecycle would also have been useful; Metzler tells us about disability in relation to old age, but what were the experiences of disabled children? How did parents respond to the birth of a physically impaired child? Could disabled people expect to marry and produce families of their own, or did their impairments limit their opportunities to do so? And if such opportunities were limited then (given the centrality of marriage and parenthood to medieval gender roles) how did this affect the social standing of disabled individuals?

There are also some structural and presentational issues with the book, which make it feel rather unwieldy. Given the length of the chapters, some sub-division would be useful, particularly for readers who wish to dip into the work rather than reading it from cover to cover. Similarly, since it is extremely densely referenced (chapter three has over 500 notes), the use of endnotes is a strange choice; footnotes would certainly have been preferable. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the endnotes contain a considerable amount of material. Indeed, in places the amount of information included here seems excessive – but if it was to be included, it needed to be either incorporated into the main text or at least printed on the pages to which it relates. Such considerations should not deter the academic reader, but will certainly render the book less accessible to the undergraduate audience, and indeed the general reader. Given the novelty of its subject matter, and the lack of alternative readings in this field, this is a great pity.

Overall, however, this volume (like Metzler's previous book- the two should ideally be read as a pair) serves as an important addition to the existing literature on medieval disability, and as an important corrective to conventional assumptions that the medieval world was full of disabled individuals who lived lives of great suffering.⁽⁴⁾ In her introduction, Metzler states her intention to 'tease out from the many disparate sources some inkling of the "lived experience"'; she has certainly achieved this, and consequently this is a work which will be essential reading for anyone interested in the experiences of the physically impaired in pre-modern Europe, and will also be of value to historians whose work focuses on one or more of its key themes. Furthermore, it provides thought-provoking context to modern debates about disability, work and benefits; there are certainly some interesting parallels between medieval fears about the fraudulent beggars who feigned disability to receive alms, and modern attitudes to suspected benefit cheats. Contemporary fears about the exploitation of funds intended for the needy by the work-shy clearly have a very long history.

Notes

1. Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages, c.1100–c.1400* (London, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. Including Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2010); Tory Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (London, 2011); Kristina Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World* (Edinburgh, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. See, for example, *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Joshua Eyler (Farnham, 2010); *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe*, ed. Wendy Turner and Tory Pearman (Lampeter, 2011); *Disability and Medieval Law*, ed. Cory Rushton (Cambridge, 2013).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, pp. 11–20, provides an overview of the historiography to c.2005.[Back to \(4\)](#)
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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/74550>