

Edward Wheatley. *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. xiii + 284 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11720-8.



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Published on H-Disability (February, 2011)

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Building Blindness in the Middle Ages

Twenty-five years ago, Joan Scott described gender as “a useful category of historical analysis,” an axis of oppression not quite orthogonal to race and class.[1] But before she could propose this theoretical schema there had to be a body of scholarship in women’s studies, scholarship that itself was founded on second-wave feminism, the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and 70s. Disability studies likewise has thrived in a symbiotic relationship with an insurgent social movement. And, like gender, which is conceived of as a social and cultural construction built on the biological reality of sex, disability encompasses both ontic difference and socio-cultural constructions.

The terms used to distinguish between the ontic or biological reality and social or cultural construction are clearly defined in gender studies. Such a distinction may not exist for race, which is now commonly denied any biological reality and thus exists only as a social construct closely bound to oppressive mechanisms. Some Marxists might claim that class—the divide between those who own the means of production and those who sell their la-

bor power—is the most ontologically (if not biologically) real axis of oppression, onto which constructed notions like “lumpen proletariat” or “American middle class” are hitched. In regard to disability, the words “impairment,” “disability,” and the now unfashionable “handicapped” have traded meanings over a period longer than the existence of disability studies. In the 1950s, for example, the president of the National Federation of the Blind contrasted his disability—by which he meant his inability to see—with the handicap that society imposed on him. In current usage, “impairment” would substitute for “disability,” and “disability” for “handicap.”

The analogy between disability and gender only extends so far. Whereas in common discourse gender is generally conceived of as binary (homosexuality and intersex may or may not be regarded as separate dimensions of human difference), disability arrives as a fractured category. Against those viewed as “able” we have a number of categories, each liable to further division: mobility disabilities, cognitive disabilities, sensory disabilities, etc. And different categories of disability have en-

gendered different types of social movements. The Deaf, for example, have a strong strain of separatism in their movement. Among the organized blind, individual independence within an integrated environment has been a consistent theme. Blindness studies necessarily reflects this and has as an implied goal an understanding of how this has come to be.

The book under review here concerns Europeans' view of blindness during the Middle Ages. More specifically, it contrasts English and French constructions of blindness in the eleventh through fifteenth centuries. As a report on historical events pertinent to blindness and a compendium of stories about blindness, it is useful to nonspecialist disability historians as well as to medievalists wishing to expand their understanding of disability.

But Edward Wheatley wishes to do more than document a moment in the history and literature of blindness. Early in this book he introduces Lennard Davis's notion of disability as "a social process through which people with impairments become disabled" (p. 7). Regarding blindness in particular, Wheatley's literature review reaches further back, to 1969—before disability activism had generated an academic field of study—to Robert A. Scott's landmark *The Making of Blind Men*.

Scott provides a sound empirical base for differentiating between "impairment" and "disability." A sociologist looking at the work of agencies for the blind, Scott found that in their work, the agencies "made" blind people; they created a role for the blind as well as expectations based on that role. Blind clients were socialized to become dependent and conscious of their apparent deficit; they learned that they properly occupied a subordinate position. Scott, coming from outside the blindness establishment, understood that this did not have to be the case. Wheatley builds his argument around that understanding, the understanding that the disability called blindness is historically contingent.

Wheatley deals mainly with the construction as it exists in literary works; evidence of how the blind actually lived is more limited, and very seldom comes from the blind themselves. His goal is to demonstrate that different national literatures display different constructions of blindness, that people living with identical impairments are regarded differently in different countries. More than that, Wheatley wants to show that those different constructions are closely related to the differences in the circumstances of the blind.

He lays out the constructionist argument in the first

chapter, "Crippling the Middle Ages, Medievalizing Disability History," and then presents two twenty-first-century models of disability—the social, which demands the recognition of the abilities of all, and the medical, which regards disability as pathological and thus requiring correction. A third model, though, is needed to understand disability in the Middle Ages: the religious model, which sees disability as evidence of sin and therefore eligible for cure through spiritual redemption. As in the medical model—where the best doctor is the one who can best cure—in the religious model a measure of holiness is the success with which a potential saint can relieve a cripple of his or her impairment.

Chapter 2 tests the hypothesized difference between English and French constructions of blindness. Citing the etymology of the French *aveugle*—derived from the Latin *ab oculis* or "deprived of eyes"—Wheatley points out that the term has cognates in no other romance language. He suggests that it was adopted uniquely in French because blinding was used as punishment in France. Reports of putting out one's eyes were not uncommon there, while they scarcely existed in England after the first century of Norman rule.

In France—where malefactors and others who threatened the powerful might be blinded—the sovereign created an institution for those whose blindness was no fault of their own. Established by Louis IX (Saint Louis) in 1256, the Hospice des *Quinze-Vingts* (translated literally as the Hospice of the Three Hundred) provided shelter and a community for about three hundred people, including the families of blind residents. Wheatley's descriptions of the origins of the hospice, its organization, and aspects of the daily life of its residents are valuable. He adds that for the entire period covered by this book nothing "represents for England the imagining of disability and the sharp focus on blindness represented by the *Quinze-Vingts* in France" (p. 60).

Here, in a nutshell, is a natural experiment: where blindness may be the result of punishment, some of the innocent blind are provided not only shelter, but also special license to support themselves as mendicants. Where blinding is not a punishment, there is no central mechanism for regulating the blind or supporting them. The two cases point to two cultures, two ways of dealing with blindness, and two very different constructions of blindness.

The remainder of the book proposes to demonstrate how literary constructions of blindness in the two countries differ from each other. First Wheatley addresses

Jewishness as metaphoric blindness. He introduces the subject in the first chapter with a quotation from Naomi Schor, who has described the relationship between Jews and the blind as more than a metaphor. For Schor and for Wheatley it is catachresis, "an obligatory metaphor to which language offers no alternative" (p. 18). In chapter 3, Wheatley wants to show how the catachrestic relationship between blindness and Jewishness differed in his two test cases. However, the contrast between England and France is subordinated to a side project of demonstrating that the position of Jews in the Middle Ages was less akin to the position of heretics and lepers than it was to the position of the blind.

Chapter 4 addresses humor at the expense of the blind and concentrates on literary forms native to France. Wheatley identifies English versions of the same stories and uses contrasts between the English and French renditions to bolster his thesis. Next is the relationship between blindness and carnal sin. Wheatley reports at the start of chapter 5 that, on the one hand, the blind are often portrayed in French as prone to sexual excess, and that, on the other hand, in England, blinding was sometimes used as punishment for illicit sex, as described in the texts he examines. It does not surprise him that—despite what he describes in chapter 2—most of the examples of blinding as punishment for sexual transgression are English. This is because the religious model of disability was dominant in England. In France, it was the blind who were hypersexual; therefore, blinding was not available as punishment for sexual excess. So blindness-cum-hypersexuality had to be punished by social means.

In chapter 6, we look at literary depictions of miraculous blinding and cure, which is to say, the religious model in its most salient manifestations. In chapter 7, Wheatley attempts the same for the medical model. He had expected, but failed, to find developments in medieval optics applied to the medical model of blindness. However, the only treatable cause of blindness in the Middle Ages was cataracts, for which eye surgeons used a technique known as "ouching," or pushing the opaque lens out of the field of vision. This had little to do with theories of the propagation of light; it only required recognition that an opacity blocked the path between the interior of the eye and the rest of the world.

Wheatley concludes by asserting that blindness was "more socially marked, both positively and negatively, in France" (p. 220). The blind having a defined place in medieval French society "was apparently a necessary step toward reform" (p. 221). The reform he alludes to is

Valentin Haüy's work in the 1780s: establishing the Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles (National Institution for Blind Youth) and inventing a tactile alphabet for the blind. There may be something to this. Haüy's residential school for blind youth indeed even shared space with the Quinze-Vingts for a few years following the revolution of 1789. More significant, in 1811 it admitted the ten-year-old Louis Braille as a student. While the teenaged Braille could not have made his breakthrough in literacy for the blind had it not been for Haüy's efforts, whether there is a direct link between medieval conceptions of blindness and the work of Enlightenment reformers is more questionable. Zina Weygand's book recently translated into English as *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille* (2009) proposes to make that connection, but her book is not under review here.

Stumbling Blocks before the Blind is best when it recounts historical episodes and provides précis of literary works. Wheatley's models—social, medical, and religious—are worth considering and applying with some discretion. Too often, though, Wheatley has to come up with ad hoc explanations of why a particular story fits a particular model, or why evidence seemingly contradictory to his thesis in fact fits the thesis well. And although Wheatley is explicit about wanting to bring medieval history to disability historians, sometimes he misjudges his intended audience. His discussions of particular works are too long and can lose the reader's attention, and too often he assumes that the reader is familiar with a text and does not need a review of its plot. He quotes from French texts and provides translations but generally does not translate from Middle English, even when the meaning of a text would not necessarily be clear to the modern reader.

It is difficult to make definite inferences from such evidence as the texts with which Wheatley works. The disability historian who is less than familiar with the European Middle Ages—especially if she/he wishes to incorporate medieval disability history into an undergraduate survey—might have been able to make better use of Wheatley's scholarship had it been presented differently, with less theory and shorter summaries of the cited texts, each followed by an annotation explaining the significance as Wheatley understands it.

This review closes with a final word about the disability of blindness as a social construct. With very few exceptions, the blind in the European Middle Ages did not have the means to leave a record of their own experi-

rience. Disability history as an academic field of study, as noted above, depends on its relationship with a social movement for the rights of people regarded as disabled. When the blind became truly literate and felt empowered as a group to speak for themselves—even before Scott’s groundbreaking sociological work—they made possi-

ble important works like the book under review here.

Note

[1]. Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075.

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Citation: Edward (Ed) T. Morman. Review of Wheatley, Edward, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011.

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