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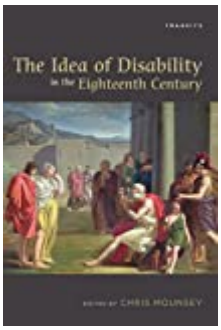

Chris Mounsey, ed. *The Idea of Disability in the Eighteenth Century.* Transits: Literature, Thought & Culture, 1650-1850 Series. New York: Bucknell University Press, 2014. 280 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61148-559-2; $39.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61148-739-8.

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This wide-ranging collection of essays covers a variety of both well-known and less familiar eighteenth-century philosophers, poets, and commentators. The selection of texts and contexts illuminates not only the principle of âvariabilityâ as it might be applied in our own understanding of disability but also the varied ways in which people in the historical period understood and described the experience and conceptualization of disability.

In the introduction, Chris Mounsey outlines his notion of âvariabilityâ as a way of going beyond a binary opposition between disability and ability. Pointing out the inevitability of human variation and the uniqueness of experience, Mounsey suggests concentrating on the âimmediacy of individual lived experienceâ of specific people, and the details he gives of some of his own life experiences demonstrate this approach very clearly (p. 18). He tries to get beyond a Foucauldian approach, which, in its concentration on unequal power relations, automatically assigns an abject subject position to anyone not conforming to an arbitrary notion of ânormal.â Although Mounsey recognizes the value of Foucauldian analysis in motivating social progress, and acknowledges that the work of political activism is still ongoing, he suggests that disability history can now move from the general âtoward the specific, local, and personalâ (p. 5).

Each of the three sections of the book extends this way of reading disability to a particular discursive context. The first four essays come under the rubric of the âmethodological,â by considering philosophical perspectives on disability and the work that concepts of disability did in eighteenth-century philosophy. In chapter 1, Holly Faith Nelson and Sharon Alker explore the implications of what they describe as Margaret Cavendishâs (1623-73) âhermeneutic of similitude,â that is, Cavendishâs sense that everything is essentially created from the same material (p. 43). Their discussion shows how Cavendishâs extrapolation from this premise worked against stigmatization because she recognized variety within types as legitimately part of them, rather than constituting exclusionary difference. Cavendish thus incorporated variation into a complex understanding of organisms and their ontology.

Jess Keiser turns to John Locke (1632-1704) in chapter 2 to examine an apparent contradiction between Lockeâs stated disavowal of physiological explanations of the mindâs workings and his etiology of madness. Keiser establishes Lockeâs view that only the empirical experience of understanding itself is available to us, and thus

only this can be the subject of human enquiry. Locke resisted conjecturing about how matter gives rise to mind, since it is unobservable. Despite this, Lockeâs account of madness does address its origins in corporeal terms by suggesting that chance associations or trauma make connections between parts of the brain, which, once established, become physically entrenched: âThus, education, custom, and habit literally carve certain ways of thinking into the bodyâ (p. 61). The fact that the brain itself creates these misassociations means they cannot be identified as such by reason, which simply carries on working as usual, perpetuating and confounding the original error. Thus, the apparent contradiction in Lockeâs work comes from this concern: we cannot appreciate the mechanisms of our own understanding, and the unrecognizability of madness is a case in point.

In chapter 3, Paul Kelleher explores the importance of the notion of deformity in moral philosophy, which constantly posits âa strong analogy between the moral and the corporealâ (p. 72). He focuses on Anthony Ashley Cooper (1671-1713), by examining the third Earl of Shaftesburyâs elision of aesthetic appreciation and âmoral sense,â based on the idea that both responses are premised on automatic recognition of resemblance to natural categories of good or ill. Despite attempts in his *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* (1699) to allow for acquired physical imperfections, Shaftesburyâs rhetoric thus consistently made outward deformity a sign of moral failing. But Kelleher ends by examining Shaftesburyâs anguish over his own physical and moral deformities expressed in his notebooks, and argues for respecting the inherent ambiguitiesânot to say contradictionsâof Shaftesburyâs approach, or indeed âof any body of thoughtâ (p. 88).

The section ends with Emile Bojesenâs exploration of the concept of power in Thomas Reidâs (1710-96) philosophy. Reid defined power as potential capacity for action, rather than the execution of an act itself. This is further differentiated from the will. To be morally culpable, then, an actor must have both the capability to act and the will to do so. Accident or necessity decouple actions from both vice and virtue, because Reid insisted âon the absolute difference between necessity and powerâ (p. 100). We can only exercise the will within the bounds of what we have power to do, but Bojesen suggests that Reid saw power not as a fixed level of ability, but as a quality that can be developed in the right context.

The second section comprises two chapters on the âconceptualâ sphere. In chapter 5, Anna K. Sagal examines the portrayal in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67) of Tristramâs uncle Toby and his obsession with recreating battle scenes with models and a hobbyhorse. By carefully situating Tobyâs narrative within trauma theory, Sagal shows that his use of models and recreations are a substitute for languageâs failures to encompass his experience. Sagal raises the possibility that, through recognizing that the incompatibility between disabled experience and âconventional modes of communicationâ is a failure of the text rather than the disabled body, âcritics can move beyond reading disability in literature as an oppositional binary of dis/abilityâ (p. 127).

In chapter 6, Dana Gliserman Kopans discusses eighteenth-century concern over the legibility of madness and the specter of wrongful confinement. Kopans suggests that the trope stands in for broader concerns about the regulation of domestic spaces, and the ways that both women and madness have the potential to disrupt the smooth functioning of the transmission of property in patriarchy. The prevalence of stories about wrongful confinement produces a counter-rhetoric about the efficacy of confinement as a therapeutic intervention, and Kopans neatly shows how, through a promotion of paternalism, and the concomitant argument for the professional regulation of madhouses, âthe medical establishment parlays a cultural anxiety about confinement into an economic opportunityâ (p. 152).

The final section focuses on the âexperientialâ dimension of eighteenth-century disability, beginning with Jamie Kinsleyâs discussion of Susanna Harrisonâs (1752-84) devotional writings. Harrisonâs hymns in particular articulate the predicament of someone with a debilitating chronic illness when faced with the bodyâs centrality to participation in worship (through such practices as taking communion and standing with other worshippers in a place of worship). Harrisonâs hymns thus engage with the pain of exclusion, but in doing so find a connection between the inherently collective nature of the hymn form itself and the desire for collectivity expressed within it. Through communal reading and singing of her hymns at her house, Harrisonâs use of the first person can stage âa return of the individual body to the collective bodyâ (p. 174).

In chapter 8, Jason S. Farr explores contrasting views of the extent to which people considered to have physical deformities could and should be segregated. Farr traces the emergence of âUgly Clubs,â whose terms of membership initially seem to celebrate the kinds of difference

their members embody, but ultimately entrench division and strongly imply that those considered âdeformedâ should only fraternize with, and marry, each other. This is countered by a view of deformity as desirable found in the writings of William Hay (1695-1755) and Sarah Scott (1723-95). Indeed, in Scottâs novel, *Agreeable Ugliness* (1754), deformity motivates the heroine to improve herself, acquire a masculine education, and ultimately become the object of male desire to a greater extent than her outwardly beautiful sister. Both Scott and Hay âimagine empowerment, and not sympathy, as the true objectiveâ for those experiencing stigma (p. 198).

In chapter 9, Jess Domanico presents Priscilla Poynton (ca. 1740-1801) as an unjustly neglected poet whose marginalization stems from contemporary and critical assumptions about her blindness. Given that this is the case, the essayâs reluctance to quote much of Poyntonâs poetry is puzzling, and it would have been helpful to have had a greater selection reproduced here. Domanico argues that âto represent Poynton as a blind eighteenth-century woman poet is accurate, but it categorizes her as an anomaly rather than a poet, and encourages the reader to center their understanding of Poynton around her blindnessâ (p. 210). As in the case of Harrison in chapter 7, the modern reader must therefore avoid being misled by the kind of editorial framing that delegitimizes the writerâs own voice and experience.

In the final chapter, Mounsey examines the writings of Thomas Gills (d. 1716) in the context of his precarious social and financial situation. Gillsâs catechism, the 1707 *Instructions for Children*, presents itself to the reader as a double act of charity: once for the children who will learn from it and once to help provide a livelihood for the writer. Mounsey quotes plenty of charming examples from Gillsâs catechism, establishing the sense that, unlike other contemporary examples, Gills really did create a text accessible to a childâs understanding. Mounsey argues that this volume met financial success for a period, but could only partially contribute to Gillsâs livelihood, which, by necessity, combined a range of methods of generating income, including requests for poor relief. This is juxtaposed with a reading of Gillsâs poetry on his repeated sight loss and recovery in terms of Steven King and Alana Tompkinsâs ârhetoric of powerlessnessâ (p. 226). In these terms, Gills demonstrates the obligation to establish âhis condition in the face of charges that he might have feigned his blindnessâ to qualify for state assistance (p. 204). Mounsey establishes the impact of these economic conditions on Gillsâs poetry, and also that Gills presents us with an example of these factors in the complexities of literary self-presentation.

This eclectic collection testifies to the variety of experience and understanding of eighteenth-century disability, and presents an exciting starting point for the further development of disability history. Cumulatively, the collection establishes the potential that the notion of âvariabilityâ offers disability studies through its insistence on the simultaneous sameness and difference of voices from the past. By prioritizing these voices, the collection allows them to speak and offers interpretive angles that contribute to a richer understanding of variation and identity in our own context.

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