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Introduction

On Reading Disability in Literature

Disability is everywhere in literature. Whether in the bodies that populate countless narratives containing physical disability, or in the mental difference that informs so much detail about character and psychology, disability features in literary production as a constant presence. And it does so across all time periods, from the earliest expressions of European poetry to the contemporary global novel, and all points in between. In the seventy-first verse of "Hávamál" or "Sayings of the High One," part of the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic poems written in the thirteenth century, the speaker notes that

> The lame can ride horses, the handless drive herds;
> the deaf can fight and do well;
> better blind than to be burnt;
> no one has use for a corpse[1]

Like most literary descriptions of disability, that in the *Poetic Edda* is accompanied by a value judgment. The "sayings" of "Hávamál" run to around 165 stanzas (depending on the edition consulted) and are attributed to the Norse god Odin. They comprise a guide to wisdom and proper living, with the first seventy-nine verses focused in particular on how an individual should conduct themselves when a traveler or a guest. Here, then, the positive attributes recognized in those with disabilities take the form of an instruction to consider the full value of living and the appropriate relationship between a visitor and a host. Disability, it is implied here, can illuminate the truths of human complexities because of the manner in which its difference revises expectations of behavior.

Disability is not a running theme in "Hávamál," and the verses before and after the one cited here do not mention it. It is an unexpected topic in the context of the poem, and unusual in its positive assessment of how disability functions. It is typical of much disability representation, however, in that it

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connects the fact of disability to an extension of how that fact might be read: it is rare to encounter an account of, say, a physically different body that does not extend to a comment on what that body does or, crucially, *means*. In this book, we will see that such judgments proliferate across many kinds of writing, from ideas of medieval monsters or the sentimental figures of the realist nineteenth-century novel to modernist fixations with eugenics and contemporary patterns of racialization or obsessions with mental health. In each, disability is figured in complex contexts: it taps into ideas about what it means to be "human"; arouses notions of "deviance" or, conversely, being "special"; provides an example that shocks, creates fear, or invites pity; or functions as the subject of spiritual or philosophical contemplation. It appears that we rarely represent disability without making automatic connections to the various stories we feel it might, as the consequence of its very existence, tell.

But if it is true that disability pervades literature across the ages, it is also true that it is frequently not seen. That this is the case is, as the above examples of context suggest, less to do with the texts themselves than the reading practices that have been brought to them. Precisely because disability appears to signal the possibility of so many connections to other topics, it can easily be lost or subsumed in what are presumed to be more "important" (and nearly always nondisabled) questions. To take what is probably the most famous example of such transfiguration, when in his opening soliloquy, Richard – in William Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c. 1592) – tells us that he is "not shaped for sportive tricks," but rather is "rudely stamped" and "Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world scarce half made up," he does so to explain why he is, as a consequence, "determinèd to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasure of these days."[2] Richard's villainy and hatred are, in his own words, directly connected to his physical disabilities, but in a manner such that the *actual* disabilities seem clearly less important than the function they serve to underscore: here, the fact that he will be, as he puts it, "subtle, false and treacherous" throughout the rest of the play.[3] In the end, it is treachery, rather than disability, that Richard's "deformed" body ultimately signifies.

There are numerous other examples from the literary canon that follow a similar logic: in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Ahab's missing leg clearly signals ideas of his obsession and maniacal behavior; Rochester's blindness, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), allows that novel to explore questions of romance and care; Lenny, in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), conveys the text's reflections on innocence through the representation of his assumed "simplicity." In these and many other examples, disability is made to work primarily as a metaphor, a textual device that,

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precisely because of the ways in which it reconfigures what disability means, ultimately has little to say about the actual lives experienced by those with disabilities.

In part, it was the need to unpack the complexities of these metaphors, and the prejudices of the representations that often accompanied them, that led to the rise of literary disability studies as a critical discipline in the 1990s. Within sociology, disability studies had already become an established subject area, with scholars and activists involved in the push for independent living from the 1970s onwards.[4] While sociological disability studies sought to uncover the social and institutional prejudices that created environments that disempowered and discriminated against people with disabilities, the subject's literary and cultural critiques drew from these social model methodologies and worked in the wake of the waves of feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race studies scholarship that had produced oppositional and revisionist reading strategies, offering up new accounts of canonical texts and bringing new critical paradigms through which to consider disability representation.

In the mid-1990s, Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) were both foundational texts in the development of the new subject area. Each brought analytical tools from literary studies and critical and cultural theory to bear on disability representation, and each established core critical terms that helped shape the development of the discipline. Both Davis and Garland-Thomson focused on the power of the idea of the normal – "normalcy" in Davis, "the normate" in Garland-Thomson – in definitions of disability. If disability was judged to be a state of negative difference, then the normal was the central mode from which it deviated. As both showed, normalcy and the normate are ideological and bureaucratic constructions, defining a subject position that might appear to be straightforward and understood by all, but in fact is a fabricated state that disavows difference. As Davis asserted, "[t]o understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body."[5] And it is the *idea* of the normal body, developed through methods of measurement, testing, and their bureaucratization, that – for Davis – sets up the implication that "the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm." In turn, "with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes," and as a consequence, "when we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants."[6] In a memorable phrase, Davis then concluded that "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities: the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person."[7]

Garland-Thomson, outlining her concept of the normate, noted that something that seems as if it should be everywhere – the normal – is in fact almost impossible to find. The normate is, she observes, “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them.” But, she goes on, if any attempt is made to actually define what this position or identity is, “what emerges is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people.”[8] The normal is, then, a set of rules that is always disappearing over the horizon, an illusion masquerading as fact. As a result, Garland-Thomson notes, disability is “not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do.”[9]

Many of the metaphors that accompanied literary representations of characters with disabilities were, this new scholarship made clear, invested in these ideas of rules or of a deviation from the norm. Every character in popular fiction who was understood to be criminal because of, say, a facial disfigurement, or heroic because they challenged the perceived limitations that come with living “confined to” a wheelchair, could now be seen to be the products of ableist cultural assumptions about what kind of body or mind was normal and what were seen to be the terms of any difference from such norms. These new critical approaches made it clear that, in such thinking, disability is figured as deficit, defined by what it is *not*, rather than understood as its own mode of being.

Ableism thus took its place alongside patriarchy, sexism, racism, homophobia, and colonialism; and literary/cultural disability studies formed part of the ongoing critical description, and deconstruction, of these power systems and the ways in which they produced cultural narratives that wrote disability. In 2000, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* unpacked how such ableist assumptions operated in the specific arena of narrative. Their key term “narrative prosthesis” highlighted how texts use and rely on disability to make narrative work. The phrase, they wrote, “is meant to indicate that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight.” Such a process was, Mitchell and Snyder asserted, a “perpetual discursive dependency,” and they noted that “disability pervades literary narrative, first as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device.”[10] Here, then, was disability representation seen through a specific critical disability logic. Mitchell and Snyder know full well that their own use of the idea of narrative relying on disability as a “crutch” is exactly the kind of metaphorical usage to which their work draws attention. But this self-awareness, coming from within a disability studies perspective, redefines the critical parameters through which literature is read. Thinking in the terms of Lennard Davis or Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, it offers a revised idea of the critical "normal."

Since the publication of these seminal books, in which a politicized engagement with disability representation forces revisions of even the most foundational critical practices, we have seen a huge amount of growth in the field of literary and cultural disability studies. Both Tobin Siebers, in *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), and Ato Quayson, in *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007), point to disability's pivotal role in complicating and enriching notions of the aesthetic because of the difference disabled bodies and minds bring to the processes of representation. Quayson, for instance, observes a kind of dissonance or "nervousness" at the level of form itself when disability enters a narrative: working as part of a text's structural and symbolic apparatus, with specific narrative functions, disability also accesses the "active ethical core" of a text since it can have "a direct effect on social views of people with disability in a way that representations of other literary details, tropes, and motifs do not offer."[11] The relationship between the aesthetic, the political, and the ethical implications of disability representation is an ongoing concern within literary and cultural disability studies, but such work on aesthetics and narrative theory has pushed the field beyond making distinctions between "positive" and "negative" representations toward a better understanding of the complex nature of many disability narratives. And as several chapters in this book show, a focus on disability can also help us to understand how the process of writing, reading, or performing a work of literature (or indeed a work of criticism) is an embodied one, encountered differently according to variances in attention, energy, and technologies of reading, speaking, and writing. As disability critics have helped show, narrative structure and style may be shaped directly by disabled embodiment – whether that be a stammer, a cognitive difference, or the discrete grammars and conventions of sign languages or digital assistive devices. Thinking about "disability aesthetics"[12] can fundamentally change our understandings of literature: what a story looks like; how a poem should sound; what we consider to be beautiful.

In other ways, too, literary and cultural disability studies is rethinking and nuancing the premises and norms of disability studies scholarship. At the heart of sociological disability studies is the social model of disability, the assertion that disability is not a feature of "dysfunctional" bodies and minds, but instead is created by the inaccessible architectural and social infrastructures that typify contemporary living environments.[13] The social model still remains the single most influential idea within disability studies and activism – a highly effective political tool that has underpinned productive change in legislation, education, and social understandings of disability across many countries and regions of the world. But literary and cultural scholars have sought to flesh out this actually very simple premise to theorize in more depth the relationships between impaired bodies and their social worlds: a common concern with the social model is that, by shifting the focus from biomedical understandings of disability toward a social construction approach, it leaves little room for thinking about the body itself. In *Disability Theory* (2008), Siebers puts forward the notion of "complex embodiment," showing how "the body and its representations [are] mutually transformative,"[14] while in a similar vein Snyder and Mitchell offer their "cultural model of disability" in *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006), emphasizing the "potentially meaningful materiality" of disabled embodiment, which can be "a source of embodied revelation," providing unique insights into cultural formations and social experiences.[15] Current discourse around "disability gain" – the recognition of the many ways in which disability can enrich human experience – is an extension of this kind of thinking.[16] These approaches follow a general movement, led by the humanities, toward acknowledging the exclusions of the politically focused "no pity" stance of the early disability rights movement. Literary and cultural scholarship is keen to recognize and validate the embodied and emotional aspects – the *human* aspects, whether painful, pleasurable, distressing, or celebratory – of disability experience.[17] More recently still, Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer's playful neologism "cripistemologies" seeks to unsettle (in a spirit of "collaboration and conviviality") "what we think we know about disability, and how we know around and through it," continually interrogating ideas that are in danger of becoming all-too-comfortable commonplaces in the field.[18] Although these approaches come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, the insights they provide have proved hugely enabling in the development of an ongoing critical sophistication in the way disability in literature is read and understood.

Literary disability studies is rapidly diversifying in terms of its reach across literatures, embodied conditions, and interdisciplinary engagements. Since 2007, the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, edited by David Bolt, has provided a dedicated platform for publishing new work in the field and has contributed greatly to this transformation, helping to establish a critical mass of literary disability scholarship and consolidate a transatlantic community of researchers and students. From the revisionary focus on a handful of canonical American and European writers and texts that marked the 1990s, along with work that looked for disability in perhaps the more obvious historical and literary settings such as the hospital and the freak show, there now exists a burgeoning corpus of studies – reflected in this Companion – exploring disability representations in depth across a range of national and cultural literatures, periods, and genres. Increasing numbers of books are being published on how disability operates in narrative, not only in general theoretical terms (as with narrative prosthesis or aesthetic nervousness), but how it functions specifically in, say, the romance novel, autism narratives, or in television comedy writing; and in indigenous literatures, medieval English religious texts, or twentieth-century Irish writing. All of these more focused studies provide new insights into their particular literary field, while also helping to increase understanding of disability's relationships to particular historical and cultural contexts; to generic experimentation, audiences, and trends within the literary marketplace; and to medical advances, health policy, and political/economic imperatives in their given contexts.

In turn, thinking about disability and literature has broadened to not only consider a far wider spectrum of what might be considered "disability" itself (where early criticism focused heavily on the body, contemporary criticism considers mental health, as well as other cognitive and intellectual states, for example), but also to situate disability within new networks and intersections. As Alison Kafer and Eunjung Kim show in their essay in this volume, intersectionality has emerged as a theoretical term in its own right within disability studies, and intersectional approaches to disability representation demonstrate that disability can never be extricated from questions surrounding race, sexuality, gender, or class. It is important here to stress that this is not a process of simply lining up what might be perceived of as minority identity positions to find common cause, but rather it is a critical process that examines the subtleties of the ways in which disability is "fully enmeshed" (to use Kafer and Kim's term) in the multiple experiences and manifestations of accompanying subject positions. Disability narratives never stand alone, but interweave around and through other codes and contexts for writing. So, for example, it is impossible to read the multiple disabled characters in Truman Capote's fiction without also considering their queerness; or to read the powerful representation of physical difference in a novel such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and not understand it as a process inherently connected to the text's depiction of race. Intersectional criticism not only highlights such connections; by doing so it continues the process by which disability in literature is brought in from the critical margins and shows the ways in which disability representation is central to many of the core concerns of writing.

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Some of the most exciting developments in contemporary disability theory and criticism come from intersectional and interdisciplinary engagements. Garland-Thomson's work following *Extraordinary Bodies* focused increasingly on the commonality between disability and visual modes of representation, and her 2010 book, *Staring: How We Look*, theorizes a common disability experience – being stared at – with ideas taken from multiple critical disciplines across both the arts and sciences.[19] Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006) and Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) each develop the link between disability and queer experiences and identities through a process of "cripping," an intersectional critique that opens writing up to new points of critical interpretation.[20] We are also beginning to see important new engagements between disability studies and ecocriticism, animal studies, and the environmental humanities, connections that have brought topics such as toxicity and environmentally produced diseases (and the novels, memoirs, poems, and plays about them) under the purview of disability scholarship. Straddling all of these areas (queer, disability, and environmental studies), we find startling insights, such as Mel Y. Chen's work on "animacies," regarding how life itself – in all its manifestations – is constructed in multiple oppressive discourses.[21]

Thinking across the intersections between disability and postcolonial studies has drawn attention to "western" biases and assumptions that pertain even in politically engaged disability scholarship, as well as enabling better understandings of how colonial histories and globalization have shaped disability experiences around the world. From a different perspective, Jasbir Puar's work on "debility" highlights how the supposed singularity of "disability" as a minority identity position, and the "civil rights" focus of disability politics, do not adequately capture the precarious nature of existence for the vast majority of disabled global citizens, and proposes alternative frameworks for understanding corporeal vulnerability in conditions of poverty or precarity.[22] Related to this, one of the most pressing concerns for disability scholars in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis is how austerity regimes and budget cuts to crucial health and welfare services are affecting disabled people. This has led to increased critical scrutiny, with a disability slant to it, of capitalism and neoliberal economics; of work, labor conditions, and the concept of "productivity"; of diversity initiatives, inclusion agendas, and changing understandings of citizenship; and of how academia, the university, and the production of academic writing itself (for academics and students alike) fit into these paradigms.[23] These kinds of contemporary cultural studies are often methodologically hybrid in nature, combining literary analysis with critical theory, qualitative research, and

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cultural commentary. As these examples show, literary disability studies has established a place at the heart of contemporary critical thinking and the forefront of intellectual activity that seeks to reach across disciplinary boundaries. The difference of disability, frequently so derided, has emerged as a wonderful prompt to create fresh approaches in both literature and the criticism that seeks to map its meanings.

The essays in this Companion work in the wake of all this revisionary research. They explore the proliferation and meaning of disability representation across literatures and time periods, and they do so through what Michael Davidson has usefully called a "disability optic." Such an optic, in Davidson's words, shows how "considerations of disability deconstruct or 'crip' discourses of compulsory able-bodiedness that underwrite epistemological claims." He goes on: "What would it mean for the humanities to think through the body and reimagine curricula not around 'the history of ideas' but through an armless Venus de Milo, a crippled Oedipus, or a madwoman in the attic?"[24] This book is committed to such thinking and reimagining, and to recognizing that, as Alice Hall notes, "disability has the potential to be a transformative critical category for the humanities."[25] The contents that follow are full of examples of how literature and culture look when we use the kind of lens Davidson suggests to trace the transformations Hall predicts.

We have deliberately structured this Companion to provide a wide range of critical perspectives on the ways in which literary representations of disability function, in part to do justice to the many kinds of critical positions just mentioned, but also to ensure that the contents are as useful to the reader as is possible. In line with Davidson, we want this Companion to assist in reimagining curricula, in this case English literature programs, where disability is often still "avoided" despite the subject's now well-established engagement with other "minority" literatures,[26] or tends to sit on the margins of mainstream literary studies as a minor or final year option module. With this in mind, the essays in the first half of the book cover the major periods and subject areas of writing in English – those that usually make up core courses on undergraduate degree programs.[27] They provide a resource for including a consideration of disability in these key curricular areas, aiming to ground the reader in the ways in which disability representation has worked in specific temporal moments and geocultural locations. It is always vital to see disability in the context of the time in which it is being lived, and indeed the very idea of what the word "disability"' means in the medieval period or the eighteenth century differs – often profoundly – from, say, that found in modern or contemporary writing. Similarly, disability in postcolonial literatures takes very different forms from depictions found in European or American texts. In each essay in the first half of this volume, the author outlines arguments about what disability is made to mean in the particular moment of the writing in question. In order to do this, the critical arguments in these essays range across texts that exemplify the cultural perceptions and literary formations of the time. They seek to show that disability representation can be a focus of, or a useful and fascinating lens onto, any major period or area of literary study, and that for those inclined to do so, the critical strategies exemplified in these essays can be brought to bear on any kind of literature being studied or researched.

The material in the second half of the book organizes its investigations not through time and period, but rather takes approaches suggested by the core *critical* ideas that currently animate literary disability studies. So, the essays here respond to the particular directions and parameters of contemporary disability representation. G. Thomas Couser's chapter on disability life writing, for example, recognizes that autobiography has been a major vehicle for the expression of disability identities since the popular emergence of life writing as a significant commercial publishing category in the 1990s. Equally, disabled bodies and minds are common in genre literature, from science fiction to romance, and Ria Cheyne's essay captures how we, as readers, might understand such representations. The focus on race, queer cultural production, intersectionality, women's writing, and rhetoric in this half of the Companion marks similar crucial moments where thinking critically about disability in literature intersects with other theoretical and activist categories that have been seminal in exploring how identities and aesthetics interact in writing.

But the essays in the volume also take a critical stance on the very construction of the idea of disability itself. Even the briefest of contemplations makes it clear that the single word and concept – disability – cannot hope to be an effective term to convey the vast multiplicity of subject positions and experiences that make up the lives of those with disabilities. For Ellen Samuels, the idea that such a label might be able to undertake such work is a "fantasy." She observes: "The overmastering fantasy of disability identification is that disability is a knowable, obvious, and unchanging category. Such a fantasy permeates all levels of discourse regarding disabled bodies and minds, even as it is repeatedly and routinely disproved by the actual realities of those bodies' and minds' fluctuating abilities."[28] Literature is singularly well placed to explore the complexities of such identification; the plasticity of the ways in which literary texts make meaning – the combination of (among others) formal aesthetics, characterization, generic affiliation, and narrative playfulness – creates rich webs of content that allow for a thorough exploration of the "actual realities" of which Samuels writes.