CHAPTER 4

Diverging Forms
Disability and the Monk's Tales

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Renouncing Form

The rhetorical performances by narrators throughout the Canterbury pilgrimage are highly diverse, and – curiously enough – some of the strongest aesthetic judgments regarding the formal aspects of storytelling are asserted when pilgrims are deliberately renouncing norms established by rhetorical traditions or formal structures. The Host, for instance, halts the Chaucer-pilgrim's *Tale of Sir Thopas* and uses scatological sensory metaphors to express how physically painful and unpleasing he finds the versification: "Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche … Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!" (VII.923, 930).[1] The Man of Law claims he'll "speke in prose," but he then delivers his prologue and tale in rhyme-royal stanzas (II.96). The Host asks the Clerk to avoid a "[h]eigh style" of performance, but he then ignores the request by using rhyme-royal anyway (IV.18). The Parson explicitly disclaims alliterative verse – "I kan not geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre" (X.43) – in order to justify his own use of edifying prose.

One of the most robust discussions of form by a pilgrim-narrator – with an overt acknowledgment of formal diversity across storytelling media – comes just before the Monk's performance. "Tragedie," as he defines it, is "a certeyn storie … Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee, / And is yfallen out of heigh degree"; such narratives "ben versified comunely, / Of six feet, which men clepen *exametron*," with many alternatively "endited … [i]n prose … / And eek in meetre in many a sondry wyse" (VII.1973–1982). Although the Monk opens his performance with the observation that "tragedie" may assume many styles of prose and a multiplicity of verse forms, he too rejects one possible literary form (i.e. prose) in favor of a specific verse structure for his "stories" (an octave, or eight-line stanza, in iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme *ababbcbc*). This particular stanzaic form is used nowhere else in *The Canterbury Tales* (and nowhere else in Chaucer's *oeuvre* for narrative purposes), and the Monk's commitment to

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this distinctive form is all the more noteworthy given the disparate range of narratives he relates. His "stories" or "tragedies" share one verse form – even if they draw from a remarkably capacious range of sources: biblical, classical, and contemporary medieval episodes.

Generations of editors and scholars have grappled with many imperfections of the Monk's metadiscourse on form ("exametron" refers to lines of Latin hexameter but perhaps some other "metre" such as elegiac hexameter-pentameter couplets could be implied),[2] and metaphors of deformity – from "garbled" oaths to "mangled" manuscript sequences – characterize how *The Monk's Tale* and its disorderly manuscript witnesses are discussed in textual scholarship.[3] Appropriately enough, the Monk's "stories" themselves overtly thematize many forms of disorderly conditions: Sampson is blinded; Nebuchadnezzar experiences a mental breakdown; Antiochus acquires an incurable chronic disease and, among other things, becomes paralyzed. By opening the performance with an overt discussion of formal diversity, the Monk prepares the audience to contemplate the connections between literary form and narrative content. In their influential approach to representations of disability throughout Western literary history, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder note that "[t]he disabled body occupies a crossroads in the age-old literary debate about the relationship of form and content," and if "form leads to content or 'embodies' meaning, then disability [disrupts] acculturated body norms."[4] Insofar as literary narrative is concerned, Mitchell and Snyder astutely observe that "[d]isability lends a distinctive idiosyncracy to any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the 'norm.' "[5] Moreover, a "body [characterized] as deviant from shared norms of bodily appearance and ability" in a literary narrative often serves only to be rehabilitated, fixed, cured, or offered as an exemplum to assert a concluding moral lesson or social message.[6] How, then, does the Monk's exceptional insistence on one stanzaic form shape the cultural meanings of his unruly anthology of disability tales?

This chapter argues that the Monk's announced commitment to an imperfect, tenuous verse structure prepares readers to attend very carefully to the symbiotic relationship between literary form and social attitudes toward human variance. Not only do the Monk's disparate stories present a range of lessons that one could draw from "tragic" tales of disability (in its various manifestations such as blindness, paraplegia, madness, or chronic conditions) – but these stanzas also perpetually reconfigure the relationship between narrative conventions of a linear plot and the rhetorical demands of a literary form. In the sections that follow, I offer a series

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of close readings of discrete episodes from the Monk's poetic anthology. Drawing on formalist literary criticism as well as contemporary disability theory, I trace how the Monk's tales (plural) use the constraints of a poetic form to test the perceived limits of human shape and potential.

This chapter, in other words, examines how the Monk's performance tests the limits and capacities of literary form; it also exposes the perceived limits that the Monk ascribes to any given body and the life-path it can assume. How is human embodiment expressed through literary form, and how are conspicuously deviant bodies constrained by social conventions? If (as we shall see throughout this chapter) elite masculinity forms the cultural baseline for the Monk's notions of agency and power, what space can be found across these tales for other forms of embodiment?

Form and Genre of "Tragedie"

Before launching an analysis of the Monk's "stories," it is useful to establish some historical context for the formal and narrative conventions of "tragedie" and determine the perceived purpose the genre actually serves for Chaucer's fictional narrator. In his magisterial work on tragedy from classical antiquity through the Chaucerian *oeuvre*, Henry Ansgar Kelly documents a "wide variety of meanings" associated with the term "tragedie" in late medieval England and demonstrates its tenuous capacity to denote any particular narrative genre, literary form, or textual medium.[7] In its Middle English reflex and its cognates in Latin and French, the term "tragedie" could denote any kind of disaster or disastrous story from the recent or distant past, the physical form of a book or booklet, or more generally the sense of a tumultuous or anxious condition of life.[8] Although late-medieval "tragedie" in England most often entails a flexible and contingent alignment of form (whatever the medium) and narrative genre, Chaucer's Monk expressly associates "tragedie" with a particular classical verse form (hexameter) and a distinctive stanzaic form in Middle English. The Monk – diverging from the norms of late medieval English discourse – foregrounds the *idea* of an intimate connection of literary form with narrative content.

The Monk's impetus to closely associate the form and content of his own "tragedies" frames his seemingly narrow conception of "tragedie" as a narrative genre. Kelly locates Chaucer's "source for his understanding of tragedy" in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, maintaining that "for Chaucer, as for Boethius, the primary lesson [of tragedies] is the randomness of misfortune."[9] Such a Boethian context for "tragedie" would suggest the sheer arbitrariness of (mis)fortune is the pervasive theme of the Monk's

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performance and not any pattern of downfall due to a protagonist's sin or moral failing. Nonetheless, an implicit alignment of downfall and transgression of social norms does emerge as a recurring plot point throughout the Monk's stanzas. As we shall see, the formal features of the Monk's verse disrupt broader cultural impulses to script disability as a divine punishment for sin or a problem awaiting cure.

On a broader level, the "dysfunctional" Middle English stanzaic form that the Monk employs in his "tragedies" enacts a dynamic play between the very concepts of formal unity and narrative divergence.[10] Each of the Monk's "stories" takes shape through a consistent octave structure, yet the narratives themselves vary erratically and unpredictably in terms of their length. The first two tales (Lucifer and Adam), for instance, are just one stanza each – while the longest "stories" (Zenobia and Nero) are sixteen and eleven stanzas in length respectively. Moreover, the "stories" oscillate unpredictably in tone and moral perspective – each offering its own idiosyncratic (and often unexpected) lesson through the downfall of a strong and powerful protagonist.

For the Monk, it is the narrative end, that is the outcome of the plot, that is key to defining what constitutes a "tragedie." Each tale is an account of a high status figure brought down to misery – regardless of whether such a tale is transmitted through verse or prose (VII.1973–1982). The Monk's announced investment in narrative paradoxically disassociates form and content (acknowledges that "tragedies" *could* be related via verse or prose), yet the Monk himself imposes one fixed poetic form upon his widely dispersed narrative material. The narrator's opening excursus on form showcases his sustained efforts to impose order upon a disorderly narrative enterprise.

Asserting Norms

One the strongest symptoms of the Monk's poetics enacting a sustained play between unity and disarray is his use of enjambment. As literary critics have noted, this distinctive eight-line stanza often exploits a syntactical link to carry the reader across the fourth and fifth lines in order to prevent a seeming rupture in the verse form (i.e. strategic use of enjambment prevents the perception that the stanza is breaking into two separate stanzas). A perfect example of such unifying enjambment occurs in the opening narrative stanza of *The Monk's Tale*, which sets the norms for the stanzas to follow. In the "storie" of Lucifer, there's a clear moral lesson: those who sin (rebel) against God will necessarily be brought down. As the Monk relates this "tragedie," he uses syntax to carry the reader across a line break (end rhyme) at the precise moment when the protagonist falls down:

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Lucifer

At Lucifer, though he an angel were
And nat a man, at hym wol I bigynne.
For though Fortune may noon angel dere,
From heigh degree yet fel he for his synne
Doun into helle, where he yet is inne.
O Lucifer, brightest of angels alle,
Now artow Sathanas, that mayst nat twynne
Out of miserie, in which that thou art falle.
(VII.1999–2006, italics added)

Through the strategic use of enjambment across the middle two lines of this stanza, the poet unites the two conceptual halves of this "storie" – and a beautiful symmetry emerges in the conceptual shift from brightness (and loftiness) to darkness (and fallenness). It is after the two middle lines that a "turn" occurs in the rhyme pattern, with *alle/twynne/falle* forming a tercet to parallel *were/bigynne/dere*. In one sense, the use of enjambment across this stanza's middle lines signals a compulsory adherence to a normative form. In another sense, the use of enjambment effaces the structural rigidity that end rhyme asserts. The grammatical content of these two lines forces the reader to overrun the line break, gently obscuring this rhyme (*synne/inne*) as the structuring principle for the entire stanza.

In addition to an unevenness that becomes apparent through subtle modifications in rhyme patterns, a tension between unity and disarray also manifests through the Monk's syntax. In the Hercules stanzas, for instance, the twelve labors of the demigod are listed across two opening stanzas. These stanzas use markers of elite masculinity, power, and physical capacity to designate the protagonist's "heigh" stature and prepare the audience for his inevitable fall. In the *General Prologue*, the Monk's own "heigh" status is expressed as "maistrie" over animals, masculine physical power, and social potential: he is "[a] manly man, to been an abbot able" (I.165, 167). It is in this context that the Hercules story uses masculine vigor and mastery over animals to assert a normativity that can later be disrupted. The "heigh renoun" of Hercules is similarly expressed through a catalogue of his famous labors:

Of Hercules, the sovereyn conquerour,
Syngen his werkes laude and heigh renoun …
He of Centauros leyde the boost adoun;
He Arpies slow, the crueel bryddes felle;
He golden apples rafte of the dragoun …
(VII.2095–2096, 2099–2101)

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The syntax in this list of Herculean labors is curiously disjointed. Violating the subject-verb-object structure most common in idiomatic vernacular English, each verb appears in the middle of a line with the masculine pronoun first followed directly by the (grammatical) direct object: "He of Centauros leyde … He Arpies slow … He golden apples rafte." Contrast this disjointed grammar with the aggressively normative syntax in the following stanza; in the later stanza, anaphora suggests the gravitational pull of the masculine pronoun asserting control over syntax:

> He slow the crueel tyrant Busirus …
> He slow the firy serpent venymus …
> He slow the geant Antheus the stronge;
> He slow the grisly boor, and that anon …
> (VII.2103, 2105, 2108–2109)

It is this strong emphasis on masculine force and agency in this stanza that sets the stage for Hercules' downfall. The high-status man – an embodiment of vigor and *virtus* – is unexpectedly brought down by a deceitful "Dianira, fressh as May" who is nearly conflated with (a female personification of) Fortune: "Beth war, for whan that Fortune list … Thanne wayteth she her man to overthrowe / By swich a wey as he wolde leest suppose" (VII.2120, 2140–2142). The Monk's syntax initially asserts the power of the masculine protagonist – only to prepare the audience for the downfall he will quickly suffer.[11]

The poetic effects of syntax in these Hercules stanzas gain fuller context when compared with Chaucer's own catalogue of the labors of Hercules in his earlier translation of *Boece*. In his prose transformation of Boethian verse, Chaucer had structured each sentence (grammatical utterance) by the use of the masculine pronoun followed by a transitive verb: "He dawntide … he byrafte … he smot … he ravysschide … he drowh …" (*Boece*, IV.m7, ll. 29–36). The poetic catalogue of labors initially recounted in the Monk's versified performance is, by contrast, disordered – and for the most part the Monk compresses each labor into just a single line of verse.[12]

A seeming desire to reinstate a preordained normative form characterizes the Monk's poetic catalogue of Herculean labors (with each labor in one line of verse with a preference for "He slow" as the initial clause), but the second stanza of labors belies how flexible the internal syntax can be in poetic verse (both within and across individual lines). The Monk's insistence on formal regularity in his opening tales, broadly speaking, does much more than establish the norm for the tales to follow; these initial "stories" prime the audience for subsequent narratives where formal disruptions emerge more openly.

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Breaking Form

In the Monk's tale of Hercules, random Fortune causes the demigod's downfall (VII.2135–2142). A severe transformation in his physical body transpires after he has the misfortune of wearing the poisoned shirt that burns his skin ("his flessh … blaked"), and a discourse of fallenness is ascribed to his own flesh: "It made his flessh al from his bones falle" (VII.2131, 2126). Hercules ensures his own end by leaping into hot coals, and the tale's end appropriately coincides with his body's disintegration (VII.2133). While this narrative does not clearly blame Hercules for his own downfall and bodily disintegration, the tale of Antiochus (one of the longer "stories" told by the Monk) overtly exploits bodily brokenness as a moral exemplum. In this tale (in accordance with its scriptural source, the second book of Maccabees), the narrator relates how God punishes the king for his pride. In the pivotal Antiochus stanza (corresponding closely to 2 Maccabees 9:4–8), the king's fall is literally a fall. After acquiring an incurable, internal condition (an initial punishment for his spoken threats), Antiochus arrogantly refuses to give up his pride. He drives his chariot so fast that he falls and is completely paralyzed:

> God for his manace hym so soore smoot
> With invisible wounde, ay incurable,
> That in his guttes carf it so and boot
> That his peynes weren importable.
> And certeinly the wreche was resonable,
> For many a mannes guttes dide he peyne.
> But from his purpos cursed and dampnable,
> *For al his smert, he wolde hym nat restreyne,*
>
> *But bad anon apparaillen his hoost;*
> And sodeynly, er he was of it war,
> God daunted al his pride and al his boost.
> *For he so soore fil out of his char*
> *That it his limes and his skyn totar,*
> So that he neyther myghte go ne ryde,
> But in a chayer men aboute hym bar,
> Al forbrused, bothe bak and syde.
> (VII.2599–2614, italics added)

This narrative deploys disability to mark divine punishment – and the verse form further emphasizes this point. In the first stanza, the Monk notes that Antiochus despite his condition will "nat restreyne" himself and he commands his host to proceed; this very sentence then overruns a stanza break – and thus also conjoins two disparate end rhymes – across

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ll. 2606 and 2607 (italicized above). At the midpoint of the ensuing stanza, Antiochus falls out of his chariot and his body is mangled: "For he so soore fil out of his char / That it his limes and skyn totar" (VII.2610–2611). The formal integrity of the stanza – the enjambment across ll. 2610 and 2611 – is asserted at the exact moment the king's body is broken. Chaucer's intricate play with enjambment across line breaks and across stanza breaks does not merely call attention to a pivotal disabling moment in this story; such rhetorical moves test the ability of poetic form to lend unity to the narrative itself.

Most intriguingly, the formulation "totar" (meaning "utterly torn apart") introduces into this stanza a rhetorical device known as prosthesis: an extension of a word by a sound or syllable ("to-") in order to ease the pronunciation.[13] In disability theory, "prosthesis" has a complex range of meanings even beyond its rhetorical functions; this term, in medical or technological contexts, denotes the material extension of a body through artificial means. In addition, the rhyme word paired with "totar" here is "char" (referring to the chariot, carriage, or wheeled vehicle of Antiochus). Whether Chaucer was aware of the dual medical and rhetorical valence of prosthesis, his use of this particular rhetorical device nicely thematizes how disability is accommodated in this narrative. Antiochus is no longer transported by a glorious "char" (chariot) but carried about in a humble "chayer" (a litter or raised seat). This "chayer" – a verbal extension of the previous word "char" by the insertion of an extra syllable – now denotes a new material object: a prosthetic device that serves as a physical extension of the disabled body. Form and content are once again enmeshed to assert how external markers of disability signal divine punishment. The rhyme of "char" and "totar" marks a sonic link across the stanza's tenuous pivot point, and the rhetorical device of prosthesis (the syllabic extension of the word "totar") coincides with the emergence of a new prosthetic technology (the "chayer") that transports the disabled king.

Formal Prosthesis

I conclude this formal analysis of the Monk's performance with his longest tale: the life and downfall of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra. This tale continues motifs that interweave throughout the other tales (high origins, a spectacular downfall, and humiliation marked by diminished capacity), but this tale diverges from the norms of the Monk's definition of "tragedie" in one major respect: it relates the tale of a high-status *woman* rather than a

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man. This being said, Zenobia is initially presented to the audience as if she is an honorary man: she openly rejects gendered social norms ("From her childhede … she fledde / Office of wommen," VII.2255–2256); she behaves as if male from a young age, preferring the stereotypically masculine activities of hunting and killing (VII.2256–2262); and she only engages in heterosexual intercourse to the minimal extent possible in order to produce two male heirs (VII.2279–2295).

The central paradox underlying the Zenobia tale is a double standard of gender norms that emerges throughout the plot. Self-regulation, physical strength, and military conquest are all to be praised in high-status men (indeed, the other tales examined earlier in this discussion openly laud such attributes), yet Zenobia's own decision to shun the "office of wommen" violates a perceived alignment of her biological sex and expected gender roles. The text does not explicitly state its didactic lesson, but the plot as plot seems to imply that actions that would *otherwise* be praised in a man become simply *untenable* if performed by a woman – and ultimately she is punished, or falls, for violating unmarked gender expectations.

The tides explicitly turn against the mighty Zenobia when the Roman Aurelian suddenly appears and "made hire flee, and atte laste hire hente, / And fettred hire" (VII.2356–2357). The woman who "fledde" the "office of wommen" at an early age is now literally made to "flee," and the same woman who had once subdued wild animals is seized and "fettred" as if a beast. In a vivid scene of humiliation, Aurelian acquires her "chaar" (chariot), a high-status object "with gold wroght and perree," and one stanza invites the reader to dwell on the symbolic and physical relationship between a living body and its material extensions (VII.2360):

> Amonges othere thynges that he wan,
> Hir chaar, that was with gold wroght and perree,
> This grete Romayn, this Aurelian,
> *Hath with hym lad, for that men sholde it see.*
> *Biforen his triumphe walketh shee,*
> With gilte cheynes on hire nekke hangynge.
> Coroned was she, as after hir degree,
> And ful of perree charged hire clothynge.
> (VII.2359–2366, italics added)

In this episode, Zenobia's spectacle of bodily humiliation depends upon the conspicuous use of physical objects. We have seen in the Hercules stanzas that syntax and gender are strongly aligned in the Monk's performance, and in this moment in the Zenobia story grammatical syntax reveals

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just how objectified the once-mighty queen has become. The discourse first introduces the "chaar" (gilded object) followed by the figure of the human (Zenobia) in chains, and the syntax of the phrases "walketh shee" and "coroned was she" place the grammatical subject (Zenobia herself) last in each phrase. Through the syntax of these lines (further emphasized by the rhyme words "see" and "shee" in ll. 4 and 5), the vibrant image of an ornate, moving chariot precedes that of the clothed, objectified woman.

The bejeweled ornamentation of both queen and chariot is functionally equivalent ("with gold wroght and perree … Coroned was she … And ful of perree"), and the chariot could in this context be seen as a prosthetic extension of Zenobia herself. The Roman conqueror Aurelian exploits the assemblage of Zenobia and her "chaar" as a physical manifestation of his power; the objectified human and the mobile object complete one another (and even now, the chariot is still identified as "[h]ir chaar," not his). As Richard H. Godden has argued in a disability-oriented reading of medieval romance: "The objects and technologies that complete the body are prosthetics, real and virtual devices that fit onto one's person, yet the hinge or seam is often on display."[14] The "hinge or seam" – the syntactical and metrical break at line four of this stanza – discursively separates the nonhuman object ("it" or the "chaar") from its human agent and owner ("shee"). The formal integrity of the entire image presented through this stanza – and the layout of stanzaic verse in surviving Chaucer manuscripts as well as modern printed editions – requires the reader to read across a tenuous verbal rupture.

We find in the Monk's rendition of Zenobia's fall a rhetorical recoding of elite masculinity as a transhistorical or crosscultural norm. This queen's divergent body (i.e. her biological gender) creates a misalignment of her physical body and what's perceived as possible for this body within the cultural value system. One could say that what is most disabling for Zenobia is not just the adverse material conditions or burdensome symbolic objects that mark her post-conquered humiliation, but rather her gender itself. To be born female is to be rendered socially disadvantaged and constrained in one's potential life-path (at least according to the Monk's masculinist cognitive schema).

The degree of social anxiety that the Monk expresses regarding Zenobia's extraordinary body lends new context to the opening of the Monk's performance as well as its (indeterminate) conclusion. In the Prologue to *The Monk's Tale*, the Host jokes about the virility of religious men, observing that the masculine Monk ("thou … myghty man") "woldest han been a tredefowel aright" if he had chosen a secular (noncelibate) life path

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(VII.1951, 1945). The Monk's sequence of "tragedies" only terminates upon the Knight's abrupt interruption, and one assumes the Monk's stories could have otherwise continued to reach a total of "an hundred" or even more (VII.1972). This perpetual rehearsal of "stories," much like Fortune's wheel, seems to cycle endlessly without offering any substantial meaning. The conclusion's inability to render any coherent lesson from these disparate tales suggests an ideological if not rhetorical dysfunction in the genre of "tragedie" as the Monk defines it. These "tragedies" not only fail to bewail the fall of men exclusively, but they also expose divergent possibilities and life-paths among varied forms of embodiment. Even if the narrative progression (linear plot) of the Zenobia tale seeks to "set things right" by placing her in her proper place (political subjugation and feminine attire), the tale nonetheless explores how a woman threatens to disrupt and exceed the very structures of the literary genre and narrow set of social norms that would limit her potential.

The recycling of key motifs throughout *The Monk's Tale* might suggest that new meanings are possible as key ideas or objects shift contexts. By attending to the recurring rhetorical and visual motif of the "chaar" in the tales of Zenobia and Antiochus, I have sought to integrate a disability-oriented approach to cultural critique with a careful formalist analysis of Chaucerian poetry. Perceived gendered norms lend divergent meanings to the "chaar" motif across these two tales of mighty figures brought down by misfortune, and the specific meanings associated with this prosthetic technology can only be fully discerned in relation to the human body with which it interacts. Chaucer's fine-tuned rhetorical experiments within the formal constraints of the Monk's eight-line stanzas show a remarkable flexibility in enjambment and syntax that perpetually reworks the perceived norms and limits of living bodies. If the Monk had an opportunity to tell a full one hundred tales, then what other forms of embodiment might emerge (however unwittingly) in the process?[15]

Disability Futures

Through the Monk's "stories," we witness how Chaucer offers a diverse range of narratives that suggest the thickness of potential meanings associated with disability, prosthetics, and the technologies of the human body. Through syntax, rhyme, enjambment, and the rhetorical device of prosthesis (as well as a pervasive symbolic deployment of prosthetic objects on the level of narrative), the Monk's performance asks readers to contemplate the relationship between artistic form and the perceived norms

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of embodied capacity. Moreover, conspicuous disordering of idiomatic English syntax fittingly accompanies the disruption of bodily and gendered norms that these diverse protagonists enact. Collectively, the Monk's tales illustrate how language itself can veer – err, verge, resist, or deviate – from the formal structures that poetic composition demands.

While the full scope of contemporary critical theory is beyond the reach of this particular chapter, I conclude by suggesting how modern critical paradigms for understanding disability could contribute to future approaches to formalist analysis of medieval literature. As Edward Wheatley has argued in a foundational work on blindness in medieval culture, "the term *cripple*, shorted to *crip*," has been powerfully reclaimed by disabled people as well as cultural critics and disability scholars "to represent the inversion of earlier disempowerment as they engage in both political and scholarly activism."[16] Wheatley's call to "crip" the Middle Ages – that is, to think critically about how disability subverts perceived norms – could well be extended beyond medieval narrative *per se* to very profound questions of literary form and its effects on the audience. In a study (published in the same year as Wheatley's) theorizing the representation of disability in modern art, Tobin Siebers argues that "disability as a critical framework … questions the presuppositions underlying definitions of aesthetic production and appreciation," and disability can emerge as "an aesthetic value in itself worthy of future development."[17] If, as Eleanor Johnson has astutely observed in a slightly different context, Chaucer uses rhetorical phenomena such as rhyme and syntax to perpetually stage the "problem of rendering meaning sense-perceptible," then disability itself is part of this future development.[18] That is, attending to the complexity of literary form goes hand-in-hand with an ongoing appreciation for the range of human variance across time. Whether formalist approaches to disability in medieval literature set out to "crip" the past, to make the case for the aesthetic value of disability, or to expose "disability myths" that frame our perceptions of rhetorical embodiment from classical antiquity to the present (as Jay T. Dolmage has recently demonstrated), disability provides a productive entry point for reassessing not only the social norms of a distant past but also future forms of art and aesthetics.[19]

A *longue durée* understanding of disability still has much to gain from medieval texts, and a "newe world" of literary interpretation can indeed open up when we seriously engage with historically distant cultural productions and social frameworks that are alien, "awkward," or contingently parallel to our own.[20] A careful attentiveness to literary form that is

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mindful of social constructions of the body demonstrates the nuances of medieval understandings of disability and human variety. When taken as a whole – or even when disaggregated into component parts – the Monk's tales offer a multifaceted venue to explore how the cultural signs of disability are negotiated, deployed, and interrogated through artistic form.

Notes

1 All Chaucer citations follow *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
2 Jill Mann, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer:* The Canterbury Tales (New York: Penguin, 2005), 1016, ll. 1978–1981n.
3 On "garbled oaths," see Mann, 981, note on ll. 1892, 1906, 1111; on the "garbled … misplacement" of *The Monk's Tale* (among others) in Chaucer manuscripts, see Jerome H. Mandel, *Geoffrey Chaucer: Building the Fragments of* the Canterbury Tales (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992), 13; on the "mangled" disarray of *The Canterbury Tales* in BL MS Harley 7333, see Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375–1510* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 270n72; and on "mangled lines" from *The Monk's Tale* in early printed Lydgate and emotional "disese" in response to the Monk's *de casibus* tradition, see Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and their Books 1473–1557* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 206–207.
4 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 57.
5 Ibid., 47.
6 Ibid., 54.
7 Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 1.
8 Ibid., 41–45.
9 Ibid., 50, 52.
10 For an excellent analysis of the "dysfunctional" unnamed *Monk's Tale* stanza, see Jenni Nuttall, "Two, Four, Six, Eight: A Stanza to Appreciate," *Stylisticienne: her newe poetrye* (blog), December 29, 2015. http://stylisticienne.com/two-four-six-eight-a-stanza-to-appreciate.
11 For a different perspective on grammar and masculinity in the Monk's performance, see Kurt Olsson, "Grammar, Manhood, and Tears: The Curiosity of Chaucer's Monk." *Modern Philology* 76.1 (1978): 1–17.
12 See also Walter W. Skeat, ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), note to l. 3285, 5: 231–232.
13 Walter W. Skeat identifies the "to-" as an intensifying prefix; see note to l. 3205, 229.

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14 Richard H. Godden, "Prosthetic Ecologies: Vulnerable Bodies and the Dismodern Subject in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (December 2016): 1275.

15 In her reinvention of *The Canterbury Tales* narrated by fictive voices in modern multiethnic London, Patience Agbabi's poem *100 chars* (her adaptation of *The Monk's Tale*) is attributed to a fictional author monkey@puzzle and renders each Chaucerian "stanza" as a tweet-like missive of fewer than a hundred characters each; this new formal constraint forces each utterance to fall within the character limits imposed by the online social media platform Twitter and Short Message Service (SMS) texting conventions; see Patience Agbabi, *Telling Tales* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), 88–90.

16 Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 4.

17 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 3.

18 Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 49.

19 Jay T. Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse University Press, 2014). For alternative disability-oriented readings of *The Monk's Tale*, see Jonathan Hsy, "Disability," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, ed. David Hillman and Ulrike Maude (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 24–40; Jonathan Hsy, "*The Monk's Tale*: Disability/Ability," in Candace Barrington et al., eds., *Open Access Companion to* The Canterbury Tales (published online September 2017 and available at https://opencanterburytales.dsl.lsu.edu/mkt1/).

20 The phrase "newe world" refers to the portrait of the Monk in the *General Prologue*: "This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace, / And heeld after the newe world the space" (1.175–176). On the notion of disability as "historicist prosthesis" and the complexity of the medieval exemplum genre as an "awkward object for medieval scholarship," see Julie Orlemanski, "Literary Genre, Medieval Studies, and the Prosthesis of Disability," *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (December 2016): 1253–1272.

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