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**Kristina L. Richardson**. *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. ix + 158 pp. $115.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-4507-7.

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**Blighted Bodies in the Islamicate World**

*[Review Editor's note: There are several Arabic names and terms in this review that require diacritics when rendered in Roman script. Because the H-Net Editlive system is unable to accommodate all of these, we have adopted a simplified system in which only the* 'ayn *(') and the* hamza *(') are used.]*

Medieval disability studies has grown rapidly in the last decade, especially since the publication of Irina Metzler's *Disability in Medieval Europe* (2006) and the subsequent founding of the Society for the Study of Disability in the Middle Ages (http://pages.wustl.edu/ssdma). The primary task set by Metzler and her followers is to move historical analysis of physical impairment in the Middle Ages beyond the simple equation of disability with sin to understanding it as contingent on the culture, religion, and philosophy of a given place and time. Furthermore, Metzler has drawn attention to the importance of the vocabulary of impairment (in her case, medieval Latin) for understanding medieval ideas about the body and disability.

Kristina Richardson also traces reactions to physical impairment and the vocabulary used to describe it in *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies*. This "critical microhistory" (p. 4) is a valuable contribution to medieval disability studies and to Islamic cultural history, in which Richardson unpacks the cultural significance of a difficult Arabic term, *'aha* ("blight," pl. *'ahat*), as it was employed by six Sunni authors in the Mamluk sultanate of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. She employs the concepts of "difference" and "disability" as modes of interpreting *ahl al-'ahat*, the "blighted bodies" or "people of blights" who provide her subtitle (p. 5). In this way she aims to distinguish *ahl al-'ahat* from other views of disability, and demonstrate some of the culturally specific experiences of disability. I will follow her lead in using the phrase *ahl al-'ahat*, for which "disabled," "different," "strange," or other individual English words do not suffice.

Her main concern is the literary manifestations of and aesthetic reactions to *'aha*, as preserved in the letters and poems of Islamic scholars who self-identified as, or who discussed, *ahl al-'ahat*, in Mamluk Cairo, Damascus, and Mecca. Richardson shows that *'aha* was a multivalent term: it was used for blighted fruit and crops, but also to categorize notable Muslims whose distinctive physical characteristics (lameness, deafness, baldness, crossed eyes, blue eyes, short stature) were taken as an indicator of moral deviance or suspect authority, or to show favor in erotic verse to a lover with a lisp or crossed eyes. The term thus did not have the strongly negative and socially exclusive connotations of "disability" or "impairment" in English. "The category of blightedness," Richardson explains (in a quote that really belongs in her introduction), "encompasses 'disability', but incorporates aesthetics and character" (p. 36).

In her introduction, Richardson provides the reader of English with an overview of the complicated terminology and historiography of disability in the Islamic world, and outlines her own sources and methodology. Her approach is literary historical, and she acknowledges but eschews the anthropological methods of other historians of the body in Islamicate society. She situates her study of Mamluk writers and *ahl al-'ahat* at the junction of aesthetic theory and disability theory, and argues that a fuller understanding of *ahl al-'ahat* in Mamluk society comes from analyzing the relationships between scholars of *'aha* rather than simply from their works alone.

In the first chapter, Richardson establishes the textual and religious background to her focused literary studies in chapters 2-5. She traces meanings of *'aha* in the Qur'an and hadith literature, the tradition of thought about the Prophet Muhammad's body and its perfection, and ninth-century lists of *ahl al-'ahat*. She gives special attention to the Sunni jurist al-Shafi'i (d. 204 AH/820 CE), whose

school of legal thought was influential in Mamluk Cairo in the early modern era. Al-Shafi'i argued against the usual interpretation of hadith and shari'a ideals about the bodies when he linked certain physical impairments to moral failings in some people. These people included "the one-eyes, the cross-eyed, the lame, the hunchback, [and] the fair-haired" (p. 27). Such morally negative connotations of physical impairments would later influence many of the writers whom Richardson studies.

In chapter 2, "Literary Networks in Mamluk Cairo," the main subject is Shihab al-Din al-Hijazi, a fifteenth-century poet, scholar, and student of the al-Shafi'i legal school. Al-Hijazi, through his writings, friendships, and biography, serves Richardson as a lens for exploring aesthetic reactions to *'ahat*. Considered one of the greatest poets in Cairo, al-Hijazi wrote love poems to women and men who were mad, deaf, disfigured, or ill, and that reflected and challenged contemporary thought about the blighted. Richardson suggests that al-Hijazi saw himself as blighted, since he nearly overdosed on the drug *baladhur* (anacardium nut), which was supposed to strengthen memory, but could lead to dementia, painful red boils, and death. Richardson's discussion of *baladhur* is fascinating, but she makes no explicit connection between al-Hijazi's own condition and his eroticization of the blighted, leaving it up to the reader to figure out how they are related.

Richardson returns to al-Hijāzī in chapter 3, and considers his relationship with his student Taqi al-Din al-Badri al-Dimashqi (d. 894 AH/1489 CE) through analysis of al-Badri's literary anthologies. Most important of these works for understanding *ahl al-'ahat* is a chapter on afflicted body parts (containing about 160 poems) in al-Badri's *Ghurrat al-sabah*, a collection of erotic verse addressed to men, originally written over a period of some six hundred years. These poems are typical of the literary impulse, common in the Mamluk era according to Richardson, to reconfigure "normative body aesthetics" and to invert "the standard trope in love poetry of a healthy beloved and the lover whose intense affections make him ill" (p. 81). By anthologizing so many erotic poems on blighted bodies, and from so many past authors, al-Badri developed a new canon of segmented, literary body parts for a Mamluk audience, who could reconstruct a complete, disabled body out of poems on separate, blighted parts. Richardson provides a useful table of the subjects, poets, and folio numbers of all the poems in this chapter on afflicted lovers, which can provide a basis for further research into this fascinating work. She completes this short chapter with a study of eyes, healthy and impaired, in al-Badri's anthology of eye-related literature *Al-Durr al-masun*. In both of al-Badri's works discussed here, "limbs and organs transform into literary or historical subjects with agency and identity" (p. 91).

The fourth chapter introduces the subject of blighted bodies in the writings of the prolific Damascene legal scholar Ibn 'Abd al-Hadi (d. 909 AH/1503 CE), also a student of al-Hijazi. Al-Hadi's short work *Kitab al-dabt* is a biographical catalogue of hadith narrators who are identified with *'ahat*. Through a double entendre in the title, al-Hadi links defects in hadith with the blighted bodies of their narrators, a connection reinforced by the depiction of all men in the book as poor transmitters of hadith. Richardson links (in an unclear fashion) the *Kitab al-dabt* to changes in the legal status of the mentally and physically impaired in Damascus after the Ottoman takeover in 1516. In this way, Richardson offers one of the most tantalizing suggestions of how political and literary history reflect similar attitudes about *ahl al-'ahat*, but this chapter is too short and ill-organized to make much of that suggestion.

The fifth and final chapter brings us to Mecca, setting for a legal dispute that brings to light the social implications of being called *ahl al-'ahat*, and that involves the friendship of Ibn Tulun (al-Hadi's student) and Jar Allah Ibn Fahd. Jar Allah was a historian who included some of his contemporary Meccans in a book of "Honourable People Who Were Afflicted With *'Ahat*." Some of these "honourable people" were scandalized to be included among the frontally bald, a condition considered by Jar Allah to be *'aha*; these plaintiffs brought before a local jurist the question of whether Jar Allah's book and motivations were lawful. In his *fatwa* (a non-binding legal opinion), the jurist decided Jar Allah was guilty of back-biting (*ghiba*) or slander, as his naming of individuals with physical blights served no moral good, as opposed to the naming of blighted (and thus inferior) hadith narrators in the *Kitab al-dabt* of al-Hadi. Other prominent jurists, however, disagreed, with some citing the common practice of including physical defects within a person's name as validation for Jar Allah's actions. Jar Allah's friend Ibn Tulun also issued a *fatwa* on this case, pointing out that Jar Allah's naming of the bald, and otherwise blighted, men did not equate to a moral criticism. Clearly, the named men felt otherwise.

Richardson's chapter 5 provides one of her best examples of socially and religiously contingent disability; the slighted men do not want be known as bald, because a good Muslim (in Mamluk-controlled Mecca) does not remove his turban in public. Arabic has a wide range of words for different patterns of baldness of the head and

beard and for baldness from different causes. Not all were considered *'ahat*, but in one story baldness caused by illness is linked with leprosy in "their repellent, unaesthetic associations" (p. 118). This dispute over baldness, and the numerous fatwas produced about the legality of Jar Allah's book, is emblematic of "intersections of honour and the male body" (p. 130) that informed Mamluk literary reactions to blighted bodies.

This is a difficult book for the English reader who is unfamiliar with lengthy Arabic names, the politics of the Mamluk sultanate, schools of hadith interpretation, and the intricacies of mature, Islamicate literary production. Richardson usually provides sufficient background on these topics to situate the novice comfortably enough, although a glossary and a more complete index would have been appreciated. Her research is impressive: she uses a wide variety of Arabic sources in print and manuscript, while her secondary sources are mostly in English or Arabic. The text is proofread well. I have found no outright errors apart from the confusion of ophiasis ("snake disease") and alopecia ("fox disease") on page 117, an error rectified in the next paragraph. When discussing social and literary reactions to bodies, one cannot avoid some of the more thickly theoretical language of performativity, semiotics, and oppression, yet at times Richardson's jargon overwhelms her argument, as when she examines "the centrality of elected affinities in shaping trends in knowledge" (p. 5) or identifies "an antinomian approach to body normatives" (p. 56).

I have some concerns about this otherwise exciting and challenging book. For all the importance given to the term *'ahat* in the introduction and chapter 1, it is conspicuously absent in most of chapters 2-4. The reader is left wondering if the many afflicted, diseased, different, and despondent authors and literary figures described in these chapters were *ahl al-'ahat* or bore different labels (such as *naqisa*, "defect") whose cultural ramifications should also be traced. Similarly, her introduction of aesthetic reactions to *ahl al-'ahat* with two Mamluk manuscript illuminations suggests that this book will be partly about artistic depictions of bodily difference, or that Richardson will at least return to these images as cultural touchstones, but she does not do so. The stark simplicity of physical difference in the two illustrations is not a match, as Richardson suggests, for the varied and nuanced literary depictions of disability in the contemporary letters, biographies, and poems she studies. I would also like to know more about her cover image (from a 1595 Ottoman miniature) depicting an older, bearded man gazing fixedly at a stooped man walking with crutches. Did Richardson intend for his gaze to be emblematic of the literary aesthetics of disability traced in her book?

These issues may be a mere matter of taste and do not seriously affect her conclusions, but I do have more serious reservations concerning Richardson's treatment of disease, and plague in particular. It is never made clear if diseased people in general were considered *ahl al-'ahat*, but at times Richardson seems to include diseases among her causes or examples of socially constructed disability. In chapter 2, she names plague as an external factor that shaped Mamluk social and political reactions to *ahl al-'ahat*. However, she provides no sources for her speculation about the spread and transmission of plague in the Mamluk sultanate and, more problematically and anachronistically, causally links the effects of plague in the fourteenth century to the removal of beggars and disabled people by Sultan Baybars I in the thirteenth. In chapter 4, she also implies that plague in Damascus was somehow linked to disabilities in Syria and to Mamluk scholars putting a greater emphasis in their writings on "disease, pain and death" (p. 105). How? Most victims of plague died in a matter of days, and if survivors bearing scars of the buboes were considered *ahl al-'ahat*, we need evidence of that. The leap from epidemiological crisis to shifting conceptions of disability is plausible, but that leap cannot be made unaided. At the very least, Richardson should have made reference to Stuart Borsch's *The Black Death in Egypt and England* (2005) or to some of the many sources he cites that treat plague and its effects in Mamluk and Ottoman Egypt.

That one main criticism aside, Richardson has written an original and highly learned first book that reveals much about the cultural construction of difference and disability and about scholarly friendships and communities that shaped that culture. We look forward to more publications from her on bodies and disability in the Islamicate world.

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