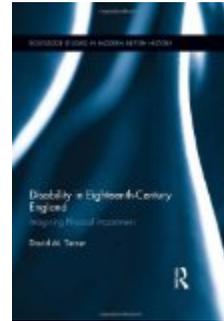


David M. Turner. *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment*. Routledge Studies in Modern British History Series. New York: Routledge, 2012. xiv + 213 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-88644-4.

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## The “Irritable Poet of Twickenham,” the “Merry Cripple,” and Other Stories

My favorite television series is *Lost in Austen*. It is about a young, twenty-first-century Jane Austen devotee named Amanda Price, who one evening discovers that Elizabeth Bennett, the protagonist of Austen’s 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*, has found her way into Amanda’s bathroom via a portal linking Elizabeth’s home, Longbourn, with Amanda’s apartment. Toward the end of the series, Amanda attempts to persuade her flatmate (who rejoices in the intriguing nickname of “Piranha”) to come through the portal with her, for a quick glimpse into fictional Georgian England. Piranha demurs, saying “Amanda - I’m black.” Given that the slave trade was still in existence at this time, it is reasonable to suppose that, if nothing else, Piranha would have seen this potent example of racism as a rather good reason for avoiding a trip to early nineteenth-century England, even if only in one particular manifestation based on a novel of the period.

Piranha’s comments, however, also raise questions about the interplay between self and society. There is now, for most people, no problem understanding that enslavement based on (for example) race is a wrong committed against people who are entirely “legitimate,” and who do not possess some characteristic that renders their enslavement either inevitable or justifiable. Often, however, this goes unrecognized when the people in question are impaired. Take, for example, the orthopaedic surgeon Sir Robert Jones (1857-1933), whom David M. Turner highlights at the beginning of his introduction.

Sir Robert wrote the foreword to Gathorne Robert Girdlestone’s (1881-1950) book *The Care and Cure of Crippled Children* (1924). Jones gave an unremittingly gloomy account of “‘the cripple’s’” place in history, which was, he claimed, a “‘story unequalled in its tragic sequence of obloquy and neglect’” (p. 1). The lot of disabled people had always, inevitably, been a wretched one, in which they had been either cast out from society or tolerated only as long as they were prepared to be the butt of others’ cruel humor. Furthermore, said Jones, this sad situation could only be resolved by modern medicine’s rehabilitative and curative powers. Turner writes that Sir Robert’s assessment relies on three related preconceptions: first, that the lot of “cripples” was always miserable; second, that they had always been regarded with fear and superstition; and third, that they were inevitably the victims of mockery. I would go further, and argue that Sir Robert’s counsel of despair also relies on both an assumption that disabled people have never done anything, and that they have consequently always been at the mercy of the non-disabled, as well as an erroneous idea that ill-treatment of disabled people by non-disabled people is a result of the victim’s impairment, not of the perpetrator’s behavior. Turner’s book aims to “provide a more nuanced understanding of the cultural fashioning of physical disability and of the social conditions which shaped the lives of the ‘disabled’ in the past” (ibid.). In addition, he wishes to demonstrate that the common idea that the eighteenth century was the period during which traditional, religious ideas about the causes of im-

pairments (e.g., of impairment as a punishment for sin) gave way, due to the Enlightenment, to more rational, scientific explanations is an unhelpfully crude distinction. These bold aims are expedited by Turner's sensible and refreshing rejection of the "medical" or "personal tragedy" model of disability (*ibid.*). The book covers the period known as the long eighteenth century—circa 1680–1830. This period, running from the reign of William and Mary to the end of the reign of George IV, is used by historians to take account of larger British historical movements and to cover a more natural historical period.

One cannot embark on a study of "disability" in any period without first establishing what the word meant to people who lived then. The first example that Turner gives of its usage is a letter written in January 1721 by the poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744) to his friend John Dancastle, in which Pope entreated the latter to find a situation in his sister's household for one Betty Fletcher. Pope described Betty as being "so deplorable an object, as well in regard of Sickness and Disability" (p. 16). Pope's use of the word in relation to physical impairment was, however, rare in the eighteenth century. "Disability" was normally used in relation to legal matters, in reference to people who were "disabled" from claiming an inheritance due to having been convicted of "treason or felony," or who, being foreign, were "disabled" from benefiting from English law. Though Pope's use of the word was unusual, it was not unheard-of—in fact, it was often used to describe wounded ex-servicemen, and thus to denote what Roger Cooter calls "a state of honourable decrepitude."<sup>[1]</sup> It was also used to describe age-related infirmities, as in the *London Journal's* obituary of the playwright Sir Richard Steele (1672–1729), who toward the end of his life was "Paralytick, and ... perfectly disabled for all Sorts of Business, Study, or Conversation" (p. 22). "Lame" and "cripple" were, however, the preferred terms for describing physical impairment, although the use by hospitals and other charitable institutions of such phrases as "for the sick and lame" promoted the idea that physical impairment was a form of illness, whether or not this was actually the case (p. 22). Alongside these familiar words was a rather more colorful selection of slang terms, many of which described feigned impairments, and which had been in existence since Elizabethan times. These terms—for example, "Clapperdageon" (one who counterfeited lameness) or "Tom o' Bedlam" (one who pretended to be mad)—were no longer common parlance, but continued to appear in dictionaries of slang, helping to perpetuate the idea that the disabled poor were not disabled at all, but were frauds seeking to hoodwink the unwary.

Suspicion that impaired people were merely faking their impairments was also highly evident in cultural representations and stereotypes. One example of this is the enthusiasm with which newspapers reported cases of violent criminality by disabled people, whether it was a man with two wooden legs who was whipped through the streets of Dublin for assaulting a coachman; or the lurid tale of a "cripple" from Leipzig who asked a maid servant to aid him by picking up the crutch that he had dropped, then killed her with a blow from a hammer, and decapitated her in order to steal money that she kept tied up in her hair for safekeeping. Other stereotypes, particularly common in comic literature and jest-books, involved doubts about the capacity and desirability of impaired people to marry and procreate. Turner makes the point that, given all this weight of negativity, it is surprising that disabled characters in popular culture of the time were often portrayed as "contented with his or her lot and meeting life's vicissitudes with a cheerful smile" (p. 69). I wonder if an explanation for this might be that those who reacted to impaired persons by, for example, making them the butt of jokes or speculating on their ability to marry and procreate thought of what they were doing as constituting a natural reaction to a situation, and therefore did not see it as *behavior*. This thought takes us back to Sir Robert's remarks about "the cripple's" wretched lot in history and his assertion that the only remedy for societal problems, such as being the butt of others' jokes, lay in the advancement of medical science: in other words, not in the expectation that anyone should attempt to rein in their baser instincts. It is also an extension of the Aristotelian idea of women as "botched" men. The effect of this, says Turner, was that "women's social 'disabilities', such as their lack of property rights within marriage, were deemed 'natural' and therefore less likely to draw comment" (p. 9). In other words, just as lack of property rights for women was not seen as misogyny, but as a natural reaction to women's supposed lack of capacity, so ill-treatment of disabled people was regarded as being "caused" by their impairments.

Though this idea is considered to be strictly modern and a result of the British social model of disability, it does make an appearance in eighteenth-century writing, most notably, in the autobiographical essay "On Deformity," by Whig politician William Hay (1695–1755), published in 1754. Hay gave an account of his experiences as a congenitally impaired person (whose back was curved while in the womb). Hay's essay has, Turner tells us, been hailed by modern disability studies scholars as a landmark text, and Hay himself as "arguably the

first writer in the history of English literature to conceptualize and articulate physical disability as personal identity” (p. 117). Turner argues that such an assessment is ahistorical: it assumes a universalism that Hay’s text fails to deliver. Such an approach, says Turner, also fails to take into account the view of the essay by Hay’s contemporaries—that it was “‘an excellent piece of moral advice,’” instructing “‘deformed’” people how best to conduct themselves in polite society (p. 120). For example, Hay’s belief that education was the only remedy for those who reacted insensitively or cruelly to an impaired person led him to seek out the “‘Company and Conversation of my Superiors, where I am sure to be easy’” (p. 117). Turner argues that had Hay not occupied a privileged position, he would have been unable to do this, and that, as a consequence, he had little interest in, or solidarity with, disabled people of a lower social standing. Similarly, he quotes Kathleen James-Cavan’s assessment that Hay ignored the experiences of disabled women.

Criticisms of a slightly different nature may be leveled at George Colman (1732-94), a theater manager of restricted growth whose experiences were chronicled in an article published in the *St. James’s Chronicle* in June 1761. While Hay blamed an uneducated “‘mob’” for the indignities to which he was subjected, Colman viewed this as a phenomenon common to all social classes. One striking aspect of Colman’s essay is the horror he experienced when told by a “‘giant;,” whom he had gone to see exhibit himself, that the latter will not accept payment as “‘he thought it as full as great a curiosity to see me [Colman] as I could possibly think it to see him’” (p. 121). As Turner points out, this does indicate that, like Hay, Colman lacked any sense that the feelings he had about the way he should be treated were of any wider applicability. In addition, Colman clearly saw no contradiction between his own attendance at a fairground “‘freak’” show, and his publication of an article aimed at drawing attention to the problems he experienced due to others’ treatment of him: “‘Though I can sometimes as absolutely forget my littleness, as if I was as big as Goliath, my friends and acquaintances cannot, for one moment, lose the consideration of it’” (ibid.).

Turner’s book also provides valuable insight into the lives of ordinary disabled people. He tells us that “the narratives of the disabled poor printed in eighteenth-century literature provided entertainment, fuelled patri-

otic sentiment, or offered an opportunity for elite and middling commentators to demonstrate their refined sensibilities of compassion” (p. 125). Turner defines the “disabled poor” as “those who might have been at risk of dependency as a result of their impairment” (p. 126). This was one reason why the attitudes of ordinary people toward impairment were very often markedly different from those expressed by such persons as Hay and Colman. For one thing, ordinary people’s attitudes were often of a very practical nature. Turner gives a number of examples of men whose impairments prevented them from continuing in the profession they had trained for, but who turned instead to unskilled trades, such as portering to help earn a crust. This practical approach is also in evidence in petitions for parish or charitable aid. For example, Turner mentions William Trudget’s 1817 letter to the overseers of Steeple Bumpstead parish in Essex petitioning for financial assistance for his family: Trudget’s daughter was subject to fits, which meant that Trudget’s wife had to look after her and could not work. There is also evidence of parents taking their children’s impairments into account when helping them to find work. An example of this is the 1823 case of John Soudy, whose parents found him an apprenticeship with a barge builder, as they felt that his speech impairment meant that he would be unsuited to “servitude” (p. 132). Predictably, there are sadder cases, such as those involving post-impairment family breakdown, as well as cases of violence and neglect.

This is a fascinating and impeccably researched book. As disability history is still in many ways an emerging field, it would be impossible for one book to provide answers to the many questions that arise while reading it. For example, Turner acknowledges that his book contains little information about disabled women, but says that this can only be remedied by further historical research. He also offers some suggestions why disabled women are so absent from the sources he has studied. These suggestions include the more active role that men played in eighteenth-century society, and, consequently, the greater perceived link between physical ability and masculinity.

#### Note

[1]. Roger Cooter, “The Disabled Body,” *Companion to Medicine in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Roger Cooter and John Pickstone (New York: Routledge: 2003), 370.

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