



Jenni Kuuliala. *Childhood Disability and Social Integration in the Middle Ages: Constructions of Impairments in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Canonization*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016. 380 pp. \$130.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-2-503-55185-2.

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## Disability and Religion

We all know about disability. Friends, family members, and we ourselves may be afflicted. Disabled persons evoke complex and conflicted responses, mostly based on pity and fear: fear of disease, fear of the abnormal, fear of deviance, weakness, social marginalization, and ultimately, fear of death. Disability in children is all the more poignant as it is likely to shape their entire lives, especially when disability is long-term. Childhood disability affects millions of children around the world; it is reasonable to assume that in medieval times there were an equally significant number of disabled children, if not in greater proportions than today.

Jenni Kuuliala's important study focuses on such children, those "either born with a physical impairment or acquiring one in childhood" (p. 2). Since the children themselves only rarely have a voice in medieval texts, her book aims to reconstruct their histories from miracle testimonies of canonization processes. These become the mirror that reflects medieval attitudes toward disability, and provides insight into the daily lives of the impaired, their families, and their communities.

The primary sources in this volume consist of twenty-one thirteenth- and fourteenth-century canonization processes. The processes, codified procedures necessary to establish formal recognition of sainthood by the Catholic Church, document contemporary testimonies of specific saints' miracle(s)—a total of 231 miracles, 58 percent of which involved boys and 42 percent, girls. More

than half the miracles cured mobility impairments, but the list of cured disabilities included sensory disorders such as blindness or deafness, and a variety of other ailments.

A detailed introduction lays out the author's approach. Four thematic chapters follow. The first, "Family and the Conceptions of Impairment," discusses families' testimonies and explores their understanding of their children's impairments. Parents were the most common witnesses; mothers testified more often than fathers despite of canon law restrictions regarding female witnesses, but siblings, grandparents, and other family members also appear in the records. The children's deformities and impairments are often described in meticulous detail. In reporting these graphic descriptions, hagiographers may have aimed "to underscore the miraculous powers of the putative saint" (p. 72). Parental sorrow and grief, feelings of shame, and occasional revulsion towards their severely impaired children, were expressed and recorded. At times, children who were deformed in "monstrous horrible way[s]" were wished dead, yet their twisted limbs and withered bodies were also objects of love and charity, or seen as portents of important events to come (p. 76). However, Christian doctrine held that "monsters" too, were a part of God's creation and had a place in it even though their deformities might place them "at the very borders of humanity" (p. 77).

Discussion of putative causes of the children's physi-

cal or functional symptoms was generally absent in these sources. Since causality had no relevance to proving authenticity of miraculous intercession, it apparently held little interest for the processes' commissioners. In only four examples, the children's parents attributed their child's condition to their own agency; in all cases, this consisted of disbelief or blasphemy, failure to fulfill a vow, or failure to properly honor the saint in question. This contrasts with traditional medieval scholarship in which ideas of a direct link between sin and disease have been prevalent: indeed, many late medieval texts, including medical writings, attribute infirmities to sinful behavior, usually in sexual matters such as intercourse during menstruation or pregnancy.

Chapter 2, "Community and the Impaired Child," examines community responses to the impaired child, communities' role in promoting the search for a saintly cure, and their part in witnessing, constructing, and publicizing the healing miracle. Medical professionals had an important function in canonization depositions since they could assess a condition's incurability. Their expert testimony provided scientific evidence for the miracle, since cure could only be explained by divine agency.

The third chapter, "Reconstructing Lived Experience," attempts to tease out the children's experiences and shed light on how impairments affected disabled young persons' lives and their integration into the community. Some depositions of the *miraculés* include descriptions of physical pain, but instances of other emotions are rare. Perceptions of family and community expectations are revealed, as is the role of family status and other socio-economic factors, clearly connected to the children's experience of chronic infirmity and the services and care they were given.

The book's fourth and final chapter, "Conclusions: Impairment and Social Inclusion," recapitulates the author's findings and offers concluding perspectives on childhood impairment and its social ramifications, with a particular focus on its role in late medieval hagiography.

Kuuliala's research firmly establishes itself within a relatively new field of medieval disability history. Her book is well written and draws on extensive primary and secondary sources. The work includes detailed footnotes and a rich bibliography for the use of interested students or scholars. The author's systematic analysis of canonization processes offers valuable new insights to medieval disability. Miracle narratives reflect many practical aspects of medieval religious and daily life: the cult of

saints, the significance of local devotional practices, and the widely internalized belief in the protection and intercession of saints. Canonization testimonies therefore emerge as rich sources for investigating medieval attitudes toward disability, social consequences for the disabled and their families, and cultural approaches to care and cure.

In examining the interface of church, saints, and community, the author appropriately highlights the importance of religion in medieval society and mentalities, including the role of religious institutions in the production of extant sources. Testimonials of laypersons, asked to describe the events leading to miraculous cures, were governed by strict formulaic procedures specific to the church's canonization process. Interrogators' questions followed papal parameters, emphasizing aspects considered essential to the miracle. Notaries recorded, translated, and summarized vernacular depositions. Nonetheless, details of disabilities, malformations, or overall lack of normal function, were carefully described, often conveying everyday events, communal attitudes, and personal experiences of the miraculously cured.

The author refrains from imposing social, medical, religious, or otherwise structurally interpretative models on her analysis of disability. She may be faulted for failing to examine more closely the nature of the priorities upon which rested the hagiographic record, namely the institutional selection of saints, miracles, and witnesses, as well as the import of the beneficiary *miraculés*' socio-economic status. Miracles did indeed "reflect the environment of the cult as well as the attitudes of the officials of the hearings" (p. 22). For the church to retain its power, it was essential to respond to the needs of the lay public. At the same time, "the types of miracles ... chosen for the processes, and the people selected to testify ... were first and foremost determined by the priorities of the procurators and commissioners, the theology of miracles, and the common characteristics of canonization inquiries" (p. 21). The corollary to promoting specific miracle beneficiaries, together with corresponding saints, shrines, and cults, would have been the long-term sustenance of the clerical beneficiaries' coffers. Here, the lament of Thomassa, mother of young Zuccius, who suffered from an eye condition, is noteworthy: she had suspected the Augustinian brothers of the order of Nicholas of Tolentino of deceitfulness in order "to gain profit" (p. 83). Nicholas's canonization process reports that she blamed the boy's subsequent affliction on her own failure to believe in the saint's powers.

Historian Henri-Jacques Stiker proposed that society reveals itself through its attitudes towards disability.[1] We might conclude, not unexpectedly, that attitudes of medieval society were eminently utilitarian: in the context of miracle narratives and sainthood, disability as a category of analysis does indeed shed light on multiple aspects of social and cultural history, not the least of

which was the mundane marketing of Christian charity.

Note

[1]. Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, trans. William Sayers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 14.

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