

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Bianca Frohne Cordula Nolte, Uta Halle and Sonja Kerth, eds.** *Dis/Ability History Der Vormoderne: Premodern Dis/Ability History*. Affalterbach: Didymos-Verlag, 2017. 512 pp. EUR 58.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-939020-83-7.

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**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

It seems that one of the challenges of working in, and with, disability studies is recognizing that definitions and pressures affecting those who are disabled or impaired are often local and specific—one needs to attend to individual cultural and social conditions for studying how those with impairments or disabilities lived and how they are depicted in literary and historical sources, among others. At the same time, concepts and approaches can, and should, be borrowed from these more local environs for other contexts and more global articulations of the lived experiences of the impaired and disabled; indeed, our views of certain kinds of identity and disability might inform and elucidate other, seemingly unconnected expressions of disability or impairment. One of the major impediments of such borrowing is linguistic barriers and the tendency of citing, especially in the Anglo-American academic world, English-language materials. Thankfully, *Premodern Dis/Ability History: A Companion* is different. This collection, handbook, and guide seeks something quite ambitious: a kind of survey of the field of disability studies, with a focus on premodern subjects, topics, and areas of concentration. And the *Companion*'s bilingual nature will appeal to specialists of the premodern world, especially scholars working with Germanic materials or early English texts and subjects.

The volume is capacious, presenting overviews of the book itself at the beginning and then the field of premodern disability studies in section 2, before moving to more specialized topics such as “Environments and Communities” (section 4); “Agency” (section 7); and “Experiences and Interpretations” (section 8). While much of the book is in German, these opening sections—the overviews and

sections on rationale and methodology—are bilingual in the purest sense. There is an opening statement, which explains how to use the book, which is printed first in German, “Wofür und für wen ist Handbuch?” and then followed by its translation in English, “How to Use This Book.” Writing about the number of specialized books and handbooks for disability studies currently available, and which focus on “the subjects, theories, methods and sources of dis/ability history,” the editors explain the need for a volume that focuses on premodern expressions of disability (p. 18). Indeed, as opposed to companions to modern disability studies, “there are few reference books which provide fundamental knowledge for the study of dis/ability in the medieval and early modern era,” even as other forms (articles, monographs, edited collections) have dealt with the history of disability and impairment (p. 18). These comments are central to the book’s aim and purpose—none of these sections is meant to be exhaustive—as this handbook offers a basis for knowledge without presenting any claim to unanimity. As the editors point out in this section, “due to the heterogeneous and fluid character of current research, controversial ideas and attitudes concerning theories, models, terminologies and spellings (dis/ability, disability) are prevailing” (p. 19). This opening guide concludes with a note on the format of the individual entries, which appear in German and English. For the German articles, an English summary appears first, which will be of great use to readers of the book as a way to access work on disability histories in the premodern era. Inclusion of English summaries offers scholars assistance, especially if their first language is not German. This commitment to openness defines the volume, from its format and languages to

its methodological and theoretical commitments, as the handbook voices an ongoing debate on the role and shape of premodern disability studies.

Following the guide to the handbook, Uta Halle conceptualizes the state of the field, represented by this volume, in “A Work in Progress: The Research Programme, Premodern Dis/Ability History,” establishing some overarching concerns and directions for the handbook as a whole, and the state of the field for premodern disability histories. She voices the effect that history of disability has had, not only on more general histories of the premodern era, but also on the theories, methodologies, and terms of modern disability studies. She argues that “dealing intensively with a historically and culturally unstable phenomenon such as dis/ability enables us to continuously question, or challenge, established analytical categories and concepts, and to sharpen our analytical tools” (p. 27). What follows is quite helpful: Halle outlines the various questions and concerns that a history of premodern disability offers, including the shape of terms and concepts from medieval Europe that reflect an identity based on impairment or disability, and considering whether these impairments or disabilities occasioned any kind of notice, special treatment, or importance in terms of daily social life. Besides these questions, Halle also offers a rationale for centering this study of premodern disability on medieval literary texts and gives an overview of the state of German research into disability histories. The structure and concision of her rationale commends the various sections. For this reviewer, however, the discussion of the field in Germany was new information, and Halle’s guidance provides structure on how to approach the handbook.

After the introductory essays, the handbook addresses an almost encyclopedic range of topics and concerns: within each section, contributors concentrate on and emphasize some specialized facet of the subject of the section. It is not possible to address each section in detail, much less each article or contribution. What follows is a small sample of the handbook. Early on, Lennard J. Davis considers a term of his own creation, “dismodernism,” and its history as a term that voices some of the incoherence of an identity based on disability. According to Davis, “it is hard if not impossible to make the case that the actual category of disability really has internal coherence,” but Davis also urges his readers not to “ignore the unstable nature of disability,” but to emphasize how postmodernism itself is a space where identity writ large becomes unstable (p. 132). What dismodernism “signals is a new kind of universalism that is reacting to the lo-

calization of identity” (p. 132). Highlighting ethics of the body based both upon care of that body and a realization that the dominant subject is “partial, incomplete,” dismodernism voices much of what premodern disability histories have expressed about the nuanced view of the disabled body.

Later in the handbook, Bianca Frohne’s “The Body in Pain,” found in Section 8, fleshes out some considerations of how pain intersects with a number of different factors, including disability and cultural contexts. She notes that, in the face of “further research from the perspective of premodern dis/ability history, it seems promising to also ask specifically how the body-in-pain was perceived of in premodern times, and how it was linked with medical, emotional, sensorial, and religious concepts” (p. 410). These histories and depictions of bodily pain, in Frohne’s view, not only reveal the ways in which pain could be expressed and felt in literary texts, but also how it articulate other characteristics and meanings of the body. Indeed, as the quotation indicates, looking at pain also means examining histories of the senses and how emotional responses might be shaped by pain. This article, while brief, is an example of the kind of work one can expect from the handbook. Cognizant of how premodern disability studies overlaps with other areas of historical inquiry, this view of the body in pain nevertheless touches on a range of different genres, texts, and illustrations, moving from medical texts to miracle accounts.

Histories of disability and impairment, situated as they are in this handbook, demonstrate how modern notions of disability might benefit from these examples from their past. But this handbook offers more than a connection between the past and present. As a literal and figurative translation of work on disability in the past and in the present across German and English, the handbook implicitly highlights one of the central emphases of disability studies: access. Indeed, as Tanya Titchkosky reminds disability scholars, disability and access are tied, as “disability is a concept that gives access, not only to calamities, world events, and undesirable states of affairs, but also to people. The disabled, people with disabilities, disabled individuals—these terms, too, represent concepts used to notice and orient self and other.”<sup>[1]</sup> It is not the reviewer’s intention to tie access and disability to language variation and translation. Instead, this work speaks to a scholarly ethics that evokes a central concern of disability studies: the centrality of access not only to disability identity and the lived experience of people with disabilities and impairments, but also for those who publish and read about it (groups that are not mutually exclu-

sive). Because Anglo-Americans often study exclusively English materials, work done in other languages is frequently unread. But *Dis/Ability History Der Vormoderne Ein Handbuch* strikes its reader as a volume interested in access from the beginning of its front cover, where the title is presented first in German, then English, along with the often challenging work which follows that title.

## Note

[1]. Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 5.

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