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The Trentham Manuscript as Broken Prosthesis: Wholeness and Disability in Lancastrian England

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Acknowledgments

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Candace Barrington

Improvent [sic] makes strait roads,

but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius.

–William Blake[1]

The first time I opened the Trentham Manuscript—a slight volume dating from the early

fifteenth century and catalogued as British Library Add. 59495—I was struck by the ways it

defied my naïve expectations, in particular the way its uniform format binds a series of poems

that modern editions spread across multiple volumes. With lovely initials rubricating each stanza

and few signals marking the end of one poem and the beginning of the next, MS Trentham

blends together that which appears distinct in the most recent editions, and in doing so the

manuscript layout makes the poetry collection appear purposefully united. This sense of a larger

purpose seems confirmed by the scholarly consensus that John Gower, to whom all its text is

attributed, supervised to some degree the compilation. Though the end product is modest in

appearance and not a deluxe edition normally associated with royal presentations, the

manuscript's repeated addresses to King Henry—from the first line to the final dedication—both

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1. William Blake, "Proverbs of Hell" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, line 10. For
the text and spelling of the first instance of *improvement* as *improvent*, see digital image of the
illuminated page at http://www.gailgastfield.com/mhh/mhh10.jpg .

indicate the new king was the compilation's target audience and corroborate the sense of purpose an initial gaze compels us to find.

This impression of a larger purpose is not without its complications. The manuscript's mélange of topics, mixture of meters, and variety of languages once led readers to consider the collocation as ill-conceived and disjointed. Comprising forty-one folio leaves (one leaf is damaged, and a forty-second one is missing), MS Trentham loosely links Latin approbations, French solicitudes, and English admonishments that seem to have been hastily thrown together in order to commemorate Henry IV's coronation.[2] Except for *In Praise of Peace* and *Cinkante Balades*, the manuscript's poems appear fully or partially elsewhere. For some of the poems, Gower borrows his own lines from his other works—for instance, many of the lines in "Ecce patet tensus" are lifted from the *Vox Clamantis*. For others, he makes new poems from whole stanzas appearing elsewhere—for example, the first stanza of "Quis sit vel qualis" is new, while the second stanza is taken from "Est amor." Just as an initial viewing suggests continuity, an initial reading suggests disjunction.

Without ignoring these essential qualities, however, recent rereadings of MS Trentham support the visual impression the manuscript gives. As Arthur Bahr has recently demonstrated, the manuscript's contents can be read as a finely balanced representation of wholeness.[3] Unless

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2. The poems themselves appear on folios 5 through 39. A leaf is missing between the extant folios 11 and 12. The rubrication makes this loss clear, contra the assumption that the Latin "O recolende" has been abbreviated to only its first eight lines and "amalgamated with 'H. aquile pullus' and two verses from the Vulgate, Psalms 88:23 and 40:3 (R. F. Yeager, "John Gower's French and His Readers," in *Language and Culture in Medieval Britain: The French of England, c. 1100–c.1500*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne [York: York Medieval Press, 2009], 145). Folio 12 has two "bites" taken from it, further distorting the contents of the original.

3. Arthur Bahr, "Reading Codicological Form in John Gower's Trentham Manuscript," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 219–262.

one has viewed the manuscript *in toto*, that wholeness is unexpected, a surprise to the reader who knows *In Praise of Peace* as an appendage to *Confessio Amantis* in Macaulay's early twentieth-century edition, or a Latin poem as one of many variants built with interchangeable, Lego-like blocks of verse, or the *Traitié* and *Cinkante Balades* as neighbors in modern volumes of Gower's French works (yet with little sense they were intimate companions in another life). Though there are different ways to describe MS Trentham's contents, we can use language change, rubrication, marginalia, and line spacing as our guides to understand its complex structure this way:[4]

1. "Electus Cristi," 7-line Latin Proem

2. *In Praise of Peace,* 385-line English poem

3. Latin prose explicit

4. "Rex Celi Deus," 56-line Latin verse

5. "Pité, prouesse," 25-line French rhyming dedication

6. "O recolende," 8-line (extant) Latin verse

7. "H. aquile pullus," 4-line Latin verse

8. 2 verses from Psalms, 4-line Latin prose

9. Dedicatory ballade, 36-line French verse

10. French prose *incipit*

11. *Cinkante Balades*, fifty-one 25-line French ballades[5]

12. "Marian coda," 24-line French verse

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4. My description of the manuscript contents varies from others published by Michael Livingston, ed., "Introduction," in *The Minor Latin Works*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), 3–10; Bahr, "Reading Codicological Form," 224–25. It is based on my work with the manuscript at the British Library in July 2008 and in reference to a digitized copy not available online.

5. Two adjacent stanzas are numbered "iiii."

13. "O gentile Engleterre," 7-line French verse

14. Latin prose *explicit*

15. "Ecce patet tensus," 36-line Latin verse

16. *Traitié selonc les auctours pour essampler les amantz marietz*, eighteen 21-line French ballades

17. "Al universiteé," 7-line French envoi

18. "Quis sat vel qualis," 17-line Latin verse

19. "Henrici quarti primus," 12-line Latin dedication

This intricate trilingual composite weaves linking addresses throughout verses replete with important themes and images that unite the otherwise disparate poems, further evidence that Gower compiled them with a specific purpose in mind.

This sense of purposeful unity began to erode when the manuscript was presented in 1656 to the Trentham Hall Gowers, an aristocratic family mistakenly claiming John Gower as an ancestor.[6] Around this time, the leaf between folios 11 and 12 disappeared, folio 12 lost two bites from its margins, and the remaining leaves were trimmed and rebound. In 1764, the Earl Gower, Granville-Leveson Gower of Staffordshire, took delivery from Henry Strachey of the manuscript's calligraphic page-by-page facsimile dressed up with red morocco binding, gilt edges, and armorial markings.[7] When George Granville-Leveson Gower, the earl's son, needed to take his turn presenting a black-letter edition of a rare pamphlet or book to the members of the Roxburghe Club (an exclusive society of bibliophiles he helped found in 1812), he selected his

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6. John Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York : New York University Press, 1964), 37–41.

7. Because I have not examined this facsimile, I do not know if it reproduces such textual apparatus as the rubricated initials useful for understanding the manuscript's material damage.

ancestor's verse and used the 1764 facsimile as the copy-text for the club's 1818 selection, *Balades and Other Poems*, reproducing in two expensive volumes MS Trentham's French and Latin contents, removing the English *In Praise of Peace* and its end link, and adding a new introduction "supplied by the editor."[8] From modest (and somewhat damaged) manuscript to gilded facsimile to deluxe printed edition, MS Trentham and its verse were thus slowly disengaged from each other over the course of five hundred years, the manuscript itself abused and the poems removed from the context that supplies much of their meaning.

MS Trentham's contextual deterioration accelerated when George Macaulay issued the first complete edition of Gower's works through Oxford's Clarendon Press at the turn of the twentieth century.[9] Because he classified Gower's poems according to their dominant languages, the trilingual Trentham verses were separated from one another, each relegated to predominately monolingual volumes of French, Latin, or English texts. In addition, except when MS Trentham conveyed a unique copy of a given poem, the Trentham versions were frequently downgraded to variants. Consequently, the Trentham poems and their relationships to one another within the manuscript became invisible, and MS Trentham moved from being a unique compilation text to being one of many manuscripts housing Gower's poetry.[10] Not only were the Trentham poems

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8. All three copies—the early-fifteenth-century MS Trentham, the eighteenth-century facsimile, and the nineteenth-century partial reprint—are deposited in the British Library and cataloged together:
http://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/dlSearch.do?query=toc,contains,%22IAMS032-001997871%22&indx=1&dym=false&onCampus=false&group=ALL&institution=BL&ct=search&vl%28freeText0%29=IAMS032-001997871&vid=IAMS_VU2.

9. G. C. Macaulay, ed., *The Complete Works of John Gower*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899–1902).

10. Sîan Echard, *Printing the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

wrenched from their original context, but in comparison to their new neighbors—*Mirour de l'Omme, Vox Clamantis,* and *Confessio Amantis*—their minor status was accentuated, and they were overlooked.

Changes in medieval studies over the past twenty years have brought fresh attention to MS Trentham and its poems, thereby beginning the process of restoring the poems' content and their context. We can pinpoint the beginning of this re-emergence: Frank Grady's study of *In Praise of Peace*, groundbreaking for its interest in the poem's historical and literary context.[11] Within a decade came a steady procession of articles and book chapters on the Latin verses (by David Carlson) and the French ballades (by Holly Barbaccia, Ardis Butterfield, Cathy Hume, Emma Lipton, and R. F. Yeager).[12] Though new editions of Gower's minor works continue to divide the Trentham poems by language and often assign them the status of variant, the energetic

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11. Frank Grady, "The Lancastrian Gower and the Limits of Exemplarity," *Speculum* 70 (1995): 552–575. See also, Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53 (1978): 94–114; Candace Barrington, "John Gower's Legal Advocacy and 'In Praise of Peace'," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, with John Hines and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 112–125.

12. Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 51–89; Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 244–263; Yeager, "Politics and the French Language in England During the Hundred Years' War: The Case of John Gower," in *Inscribing the Hundred Years' War in French and English Cultures*, ed. Denise N. Baker (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 127–157; Yeager, "John Gower's French"; Yeager, "John Gower's Audience: The Ballades," *Chaucer Review* 40, no. 1 (2005): 81–105; Cathy Hume, "Why Did Gower Write the *Traitié*?," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, with John Hines and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 263–75; Holly Barbaccia, "The Woman's Response in John Gower's *Cinkante Balades*," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, with John Hines and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 230–238; David R. Carlson, "Gower *pia vota bibit* and Henry IV in 1399 November," *English Studies* 89, no. 4 (2008): 377–384.

enterprise of the TEAMS project and Gower's newest editors have made these poems easily available to any scholar with an internet connection.[13] More recent efforts have examined MS Trentham as a deliberate compilation. In addition to Bahr's cogent argument that MS Trentham is "an artfully constructed meditation on the multiple natures and implications of kingship" and yields its aesthetic pleasures to readers as they grapple with the complex presentation of those important issues, I have argued that a legal argument threads its way through the verse, making the case for Henry IV's legitimate claim to the English throne and uniting an otherwise disjointed collocation.[14] These studies frequently observe that images of impairment permeate the contents of the poems themselves: besides announcing his blindness at the end of the manuscript, Gower packs the verse with images of disabled human bodies as well as the fractured social body, fallen and unable to stand.

When we couple the multiple ways MS Trentham and its poetic texts have been disfigured (either by material damage or decontextualization) with the ways scholarship has identified its images of impairment, then the compilation appears ripe for elucidation using the insights of disability theory. Once we start asking questions articulated by disability theorists, we see that MS Trentham's discourse of impairment manifests itself in three ways: figuratively (with the impaired body as a metaphor for the dysfunctional social or political body), corporeally (with the presentation of Gower's blindness), and textually (with the manuscript's gradual

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13. John Gower, *The Minor Latin Works with In Praise of Peace*, ed. Michael Livingston and R. F. Yeager, trans. R. F. Yeager, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005); John Gower, *The French Balades*, ed. and trans. R. F. Yeager, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011).

14. Bahr, "Reading Codicological Form," 261; Candace Barrington, "The Spectral Advocate in John Gower's Trentham Manuscript," in *Theorizing Legal Personhood in Late Medieval England*, ed. Andreea Boboc (Leiden: Brill Publishers, forthcoming).

material and contextual degradation). From these three manifestations, we can not only see productive ways to apply disability theories to medieval sources, but also recalibrate some of the binaries that have shaped disability studies. These readings of MS Trentham allow us to nuance Lennard Davis's observation that prior to the eighteenth century a sharp binary existed between the ideal ("a mythopoetic body" manifest only in the divine body and "not attainable by a human") and the grotesque ("a visual form related to the concept of the ideal and its corollary that all bodies are in some sense disabled").[15] According to the doctrine of Original Sin, most closely associated with Augustine of Hippo, "[p]ostlapsarian humanity. . . incorporates the state of *homo destitutus*, characteristic of which is a deficient nature (*natura deficiens*), so that *destitutio, deformatio,* and *degeneratio* are practically normal phenomena associated with the human condition."[16] For this reason, Christian theology placed *all* postlapsarian bodies along a spectrum of impairment. We can, therefore, expect impairment, not some ideal, to be the norm in medieval texts. Depending on whether the body is figurative, corporeal, or textual, however, its relationship to the ideal body shifts, allowing us to examine that relationship with different models of disability.[17] For instance, when the impaired body is used as a metaphor for the dysfunctional society, Gower's prayers for a cure ultimately resemble the religious model of disability, wherein the disability is a "site of deficit ready for divine intervention and miraculous

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15. Lennard J. Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

16. Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400* (London: Routledge, 2006), 47.

17. Compare to Julie Singer, "Disability and the Social Body," *postmedieval* 3, no. 2 (2012): 135–141, who records efforts by medievalists to focus on one paradigm or the other and advocates "an inquiry into the transformative effects that 'disabled' bodies might operate on other categories of social identity" (137).

cure."[18] Gower's blindness, on the other hand, belongs on a spectrum of sightedness that allows him to achieve what he might not be able to achieve otherwise by borrowing the cultural authority associated with the blind prophet. In this case, the social model of disability is the most beneficial framework for understanding these dynamics. Finally, MS Trentham's reception history more closely maps modern medical perceptions of impairment; in addition to the physical impairments that were the expected result of age, further impairments were created by the norms of late-nineteenth-century editing practices that perceived the Trentham poems as deformed and in need of correction. Though impairment is a condition common to all sub-celestial bodies, these three models of disability (social, religious, and medical) help identify the conceptual norms in play and whether correction or supplementation—a prosthesis, to borrow a term from disability theory—is deemed necessary.

Using terms and concepts associated with disability theory to link MS Trentham's figurative, corporeal, and textual impairments echoes comparable moves made when *disability* is applied to disparate groups of people who could arguably be seen as having little in common. In what way does the mentally ill man have more in common with the paraplegic woman next door than with any other neighbor on his block? Likewise, what does Gower's blindness have to do with modern editions of "Rex celi deus"? In each case, the term *disability* provides a linchpin connecting an historical moment's three assumptions: what it defines as normal, how it judges deviations from that norm, and when it determines those deviations require corrective

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18. Edward Wheatley, "Medieval Constructions of Blindness in France and England," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 64. See also, Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

prostheses.[19] By remembering that impairment was normal for Gower and his contemporaries, we have much to learn from his use of prostheses, especially the way an impairment can be a disability, a prosthesis, or both. In order to riddle through the implications for our understanding of the manuscript compilation, I will begin by focusing on the first category of impairment, images of the crippled social body in MS Trentham and the dizzying array of prostheses added to compensate for those disabilities. By refracting these images of impaired human and metaphorical bodies through disability theories, we will have a new means for understanding Gower's use of those images to condemn his opponents, authorize his poetic counsel, and generate the verse compilation. The second impairment, Gower's blindness, never becomes a disability; instead, it is used to authorize further the prosthetic function proposed by the compilation's argument. The third site of impairment, the manuscript itself, initially presents its contents as a rhetorical prosthesis for correcting the impaired social body; then, itself impaired by centuries of physical degradation and editorial emendations, MS Trentham becomes prostheticized and a material witness to changing attitudes toward impairment and editorial prostheses. In these three ways, MS Trentham becomes a useful test case for the multiple ways we can deploy disability theories to rethink not only medieval depictions of metaphorical disability and human sensory impairment but also the modern reception of (often damaged) textual objects. By pushing its inquiry beyond the corporeal and into the metaphorical and material categories, this study reveals shifting attitudes toward human impairment and the elastic definitions of *disability*.

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19. Simi Linton, "Reassigning Meaning," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 224.

Metaphorical Disability: the Impaired Social Body

Metaphorical images of the deformed social body pervade Gower's literary corpus, and disability theory—especially the tension between the medical and religious models—brings into focus the ways standards for this metaphorical body differed from standards for the physical body. According to Christian theology, all postlapsarian humans are impaired in at least one way: they are stained by original sin. Consequently, they suffer from a range of impairments, most of which are permanent, not subject to medical intervention, and responsive only to a miracle's divine intervention. They might require such prostheses or interventions as crutches or litters, but the impaired are not responsible for recovering an unimpaired body. When, however, similar impairments are metaphorically associated with the social body, the impairment becomes an intolerable disability, cures and prostheses are prescribed, and a complete recovery is demanded. In earlier works, Gower confronted readers with this image of the impaired social body in need of immediate correction at pivotal moments in the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Confessio Amantis*: the estates satire in the *Confessio*'s Prologue, the *Confessio*'s Lancastrian closing, the "monstrous" body of dehumanized rebels in Book 1 of the *Vox*, and the statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the fragmented state in both poems.[20] Incessantly, Gower demands

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20. Gower, Prologue, *Confessio Amantis*, lines 93–584 and 595–665; Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, 7, books 1–4). Unless stated otherwise, all citations are from one of the TEAMS editions. Eve Salisbury, "Remembering Origins: Gower's Monstrous Body Poetic," in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Asheville, North Carolina: Pegasus Press, 1998), 172; Malte Urban, "Past and Present: Gower's Use of Old Books in *Vox Clamantis*," in *John Gower: Manuscripts, Readers, Contexts*, ed. Malte Urban (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009), 175–194; John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, 3 vols., TEAMS (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000); Eric Stockton, trans., *Major Latin Works of John Gower* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1962).

from the deformed social body a reaction reminiscent of the medical model of disability that generally does not seem applicable to the Middle Ages.[21]

In MS Trentham, this imagery of somatic deformity continues, but with less confidence in the social body's ability to heal itself, and Gower's assessment ultimately more closely resembles the religious model wherein divine intervention is necessary for a cure. This move toward a religious model begins when *In Praise of Peace* does not contrast the disabled social body to an ideal political state and shifts instead to illustrate the instability of a fractured, mangled state by contrasting it with the healthy functioning of another metaphorical (albeit idealized) body, the Church Spiritual: "Crist is the heved, and we ben membres alle, / Als wel the subgit as the sovereign."[22] At one level, the words "als wel" assert that both the king and the commons form the "membres" of Christ's body.[23] But those two words serve two additional purposes. First, they relocate the commons from its role as the body of the Church universal to its role as the body of the realm (of which the king is the head). Second, the two words leave behind the perfect Christian body for the imperfect social body. This deformed body reappears throughout this and other Trentham poems. In addition to this fractured and monstrous social body responsible for the oppression of peace—abroad, mis-created foreigners plan invasions; at home, the social body's limbs "aken"—Gower examines another metaphorical body, the one

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21. Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, 9; Wheatley, "Medieval Constructions," 64. When it comes to the need for correction, Metzler and Wheatley differ in their understanding of the medical model in medieval texts. Metzler sidelines the model because there were few opportunities for medical intervention during the Middle Ages. Wheatley reconfigures the medical model by overlaying a religious veneer, whereby he establishes the need for correction.

22. Gower, *In Praise of Peace,* lines 154–5. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 205.

23. Gower, *In Praise of Peace,* line 165.

responsible for restoring that peace, the king's body.[24] Thus, the king is integral to two metaphors: the king is the tenor for the metaphorical social body's head, and the king's body is the metaphorical vehicle for the kingdom. Sometimes the poems demand an immediate self-imposed cure; predominately and ultimately, the poems appeal for a cure through divine intervention.

The Trentham poems activate a dialectic between the metaphor of the social body and the king's body as metaphor for the kingdom, a dialectic made clear in the *Traitié*'s appreciable concern with the consequences of the king's private depravities on larger social and political structures. Exempla repeatedly report the monstrous consequences of kings' and rulers' breaking the bonds of marriage. As the result of that adultery and the inevitable revenge, all sorts of inviolable bonds are shattered—progeny kill parents and children are killed; an entire social order is destroyed by the resulting downfall of a city, temple, or kingdom.[25] The exchange of contagion between the king's body and the social body illustrates the disastrous consequences when the debilitating infection is not contained. In the dialectic, it is never clear whether the king's misbehaviors cause social deformation or his sins expose the pre-existence of a faltering kingdom. Nevertheless, the *Traitié* places the onus of the cure on the king, who must overcome his flesh in order to save the kingdom.[26]

To these images of the broken or deformed social body and the contagious royal person, the Trentham verses add a third sort: the fallen (social) body crippled by war's afflictions, an

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24. Ibid., lines 268 and 260.

25. Lipton, *Affections of the Mind*, 51–89. Gower, *Traitié*, 7 for Hercules, 8 for Jason's sons, 9 for Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, 10 for Troy and Lucrece, 11 for Albinus, 12 for Tereus, 13 for Pharoah, and 14 for David.

26. Gower, *Traitié,* stanza xvi, line 7.

image that appears at the beginning of the collection. As complex prostheses are introduced and serially found inadequate, the social body and the king's body become intertwined and entangled, as do the medical and religious modes brought forth to diagnose and cure the disabilities. Both the opening Latin proem and the first English stanza praise King Henry for raising to standing the body of England, which was "doun falle" and "[n]ow stant up riht."[27] It is this particular impairment that *In Praise of Peace* repeatedly returns to, and it is this impairment's prostheses that will concern us. The unstable social body during the final years of Richard II's reign became the means by which Henry IV justified his invasion. According to the logic of Lancastrian propaganda, we might expect Henry Bolingbroke to be the long-awaited prosthesis, an assumption that seems fulfilled when subsequent Latin verses praise Henry as the "new stock . . . joined to the old stem" ("Sic veteri iuncta stipiti nova stirps redit uncta"), with Henry as a prosthetic splint that allows the broken nation to stand, and Gower's verse as a textual prosthesis that "alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view."[28]A series of metaphors in *In Praise of Peace* makes clear the new king is not a sufficient crutch to keep the nation standing upright; he needs peace as his own stabilizing force, "a newe salve" to cure "this olde sor."[29] King Henry, however, has failed to maintain the law. Because he continued to rely on regional retainers rather than create a national power based on the "universal application of royal law and royal justice," Henry found himself needing to exploit and reward "the proven

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27. Gower, *In Praise of Peace*, 5–6.

28. Gower, "H. aquile pullus," line 4. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 8.

29. Gower, *In Praise of Peace,* line 122.

loyalty of the servants who . . . enabled him to win the throne."[30] According to early fifteenth-century constitutional concepts, the king's law and the "formal, official manifestations of royal rule—the increasingly sophisticated judicial machinery and central bureaucracy, and the developing role of parliament"—were essential to the realm's internal security.[31] A decade earlier, Richard II's fundamental attack on the law and property rights had undermined his authority in ways that Henry Bolingbroke later turned to his advantage; as king, Henry had yet to demonstrate that he would reverse that attack and take his rightful role as guarantor of the law and its judicious application. According to the logic of Gower's poem, just as England needed Henry to restore the kingdom to its feet, Henry in turn required peace, which itself requires the rule of law. A kingdom under the rule of law and at peace becomes the tenor of the metaphoric vehicle of the social body that "stonden ate beste," an image the poem repeats seven times before succinctly ending with "Maintene lawe, and so the pes schal stonde."[32] In sum, without the law, peace falls; without peace, Henry falls; and without Henry, England's social body falls.

To this series of prostheses, MS Trentham adds one more: the compiled poems that demonstrate all the qualities associated with narrative prostheses. [33] With its repeated iterations of the impaired social and royal bodies, the compilation exposes a "deviance or marked

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30. Helen Castor, *The King, the Crown, and the Duchy of Lancaster: Public Authority and Private Power, 1399–1461* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17–20.

31. Castor, *The King, the Crown*, 5–6.

32. Gower, *In Praise of Peace*, lines 67, 80, 74, 85, 184, 191, 236, 238, 259, 322, and 385.

33. For the following discussion of the qualities associated with narrative prostheses and the descriptions of those qualities, see Mitchell and Snyder, "Narrative Prosthesis," 209.

difference."[34] When the poems locate the kingdom's crippled state in the king's failure to restore

the rule of law, the compilation "consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an

explanation of the deviation's origins."[35] Rather than blame only the misshapen social body, the

poems bring the deviance "from the periphery . . . to the center" and make the king responsible.[36]

Finally, by embedding that solution in the process of reading the poems, the compilation

"rehabilitates . . . the deviance in some manner."[37] It achieves this rehabilitation by going beyond

repeating the Lancastrian party line about the nature and origins of the lamed social body; the

poems appropriate gestures associated with England's ecclesiastical and royal courts in order to

demonstrate how the various jurisdictions with their established procedures and precedents

provide a means for warranting the validity of the Lancastrian claim without ever condoning the

questionable invasion and deposition.[38] That is, MS Trentham's series of poems construct the

argument missing from Lancastrian propaganda. As a corrective generated by the impairment's

disruptive presence, the compilation (with its intrinsic legal argument) models the legal

prosthesis that Henry needs to restore the peace necessary to repair the fallen and broken social

body.

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34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Paul Strohm, "Saving the Appearances: Chaucer's Purse and the Fabrication of the Lancastrian Claim," in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 21–40; Grady, "The Lancastrian Gower," 559–571; Barrington, "John Gower's Legal Advocacy and 'In Praise of Peace,'" 117–121; Barrington, "The Spectral Advocate."

Yet it seems that Gower remains unconvinced by the absolute viability of even that legal prosthesis because he closes the compilation with a final prayer: "Hoc tamen, in fine verborum queso meorum, / Prospera quod statuat regna futura Deus. Amen" ["Nevertheless I ask this one final thing, the last of my words: / That God make our kingdoms prosperous in the future. Amen."][39] Though that prayer is only one line, Gower's "fine verborum" echoes the 134 lines of prayer that close the Lancastrian versions of the *Confessio Amantis*, glossed as prayers "pro statu regni" [for the kingdom], which are in effect instructions for the correct rule of England.[40] Here, having already dispensed a prosthesis in the form of comprehensive legal advice, Gower shores up his admonitions with a call for divine intervention. Subtly, the line expands its desires for a prosperous future beyond the singular "regni" to the plural "regna" and possibly thereby condones Henry's ambitions to reclaim French territories.[41] This prayer, the compilation's final statement from Gower, continues the tension between the medical and religious models by combining an implicit call for action—consolidate England's claims on France!—with an explicit reliance on the hand of God.

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39. Gower, "Henrici quarti primus," line 12.

40. Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 8.2973. The maze of *Confessio Amantis* recensions and variations is intricate enough to warrant an essay; for my purposes, it will do to divide them into two camps: Ricardian (primarily Macaulay's first recension) and Lancastrian (primarily Macaulay's third recension) (*The Complete Works of John Gower*: *Confessio Amantis*, 1.cxxxviii.) For the resonance of "Henrici quarti primus" with the *Confessio*'s final prayers, see Michael Livingston, ed., "Introduction," in *The Minor Latin Works*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Press, 2005), 104. For a fuller development of this argument about the concluding prayers, see my forthcoming article: Barrington, "Personas and Performance in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Chaucer Review* 48, no. 4 (2014).

41. Yeager, "Politics and the French Language," 151–153.

Somatic Disability: The Blind Poet

MS Trentham's depiction of human sensory impairment centers on Gower's blindness, and disability theory's social model brings into focus the ways Gower transforms his impairment into a prosthesis. Unlike the crippled social body, Gower's blindness is not a problem needing a solution; instead, reports of his failing eyesight address his ongoing efforts as self-publicist promoting his credentials as a royal advisor.[42] These efforts can be traced through his major works—*Mirour de l'Omme, Vox Clamantis,* and *Confessio Amantis* in French, Latin, and English—as well as through his lesser works in all three languages. Perhaps made all the more urgent by his failing health, their protreptic message of personal and social reform continues into the Trentham compilation. Gower's discourse of blindness unites the metaphorical disability with the literal impairment by looking at his own experience as well as social and political forces for ways to define his impairment; in so doing, the poem's arguments make a move akin to those made by disability theory's social model.[43] By placing the negative cultural values associated with blindness in conversation with the positive ones, Gower blurs the borderline between physical reality and literary trope. In this way Gower performs his blindness as both impairment and disability. Moreover, both modes empower him and transform his failing eyesight into a rhetorical prosthesis.

The MS Trentham Gower's blindness is in marked contrast to the illustration of Gower in the *Vox Clamantis* manuscript as the clear-eyed satirist, with his bow pulled taut and ready to

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42. For a discussion of blindness seeking treatment in the Middle Ages, see Julie Singer, *Blindness and Therapy in Late Medieval French and Italian Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 15–19 and 54–78.

43. Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 2.

deliver its piercing arrows of truth in a world gone awry.[44] At the same time, his blindness also differs significantly from the first instance of blindness in MS Trentham: the image of a blind archer in "Ecce patet tensus," the Latin verse linking the two French ballades and unique to the Trentham manuscript:

> Ecce, patet tensus ceci Cupidinis arcus;
>
> Unde sagitta volans ardor amorist erit.
>
> Omnia vincit amor; cecus tamen errat ubique,
>
> Quo sibi directum carpere nescit iter.
>
> Ille suos famulos ita cecos ducit amantes.
>
> Quod sibi quid deceat non videt ullus amans.
>
> Sic oculus cordis carnis caligine cecus
>
> Decidit, et raio nil racionis habet.
>
> Sic amor ex velle vivit, quem ceca voluptas
>
> Nutrit, ET ad placitum cunta ministrat ei;
>
> Subque suis alis mundus requiescit in umbra,
>
> Et sua precepta Quisquis ubique facit.
>
> [Lo, here is the taut bow of the blind Cupid,
>
> From which the flying arrow is the flame of Love.
>
> Love conquers all, but, being blind he strays to all places
>
> And knows not whither his trail will lead.
>
> Thus does he lead lovers, his blind servants.
>
> No lover sees what is fitting for him;

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44. British Library MS Cotton Tiberius A.IV, fol. 9.

Thus their eye, blinded by the fleshly heart,

Yields, and their reason has nothing of reason about it.

Thus Love lives on will, and blind desire fosters it,

And bestows everything on him as his whim,

And under the shadow of his wings the world lies at rest.

And everyone obeys his precepts.] [45]

This archer is a blind Cupid with his bow taut and ready to let loose his arrows on unsuspecting lovers, who are also blind.[46] All this blindness perpetuates a disordered world, which Cupid rules by paradox.[47] This chaotic image falls in line with the *Confessio Amantis*'s depictions of blindness as metaphors for the soul corrupted by prodigious desire.[48] The covetous lover, like "The blinde man [who] no colour demeth / But al is on, riht as him semeth," is blind to distinctions and loses all discretion; his judgments cannot be trusted.[49] The blinded lover is therefore like the blind archer who shoots willy-nilly, wreaking harm without satisfying his desires. An unnatural and willful turning away from the divine light, the libidinous man's impairment is a form of self-blinding.[50]

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45. Gower, "Ecce patet tensus," lines 1–11.

46. Ibid., line 5.

47. Ibid., lines 17–18.

48. Gower, *Confessio Amantis,* 5.2164–5.

49. Ibid., 5.2489–90.

50. Compare "De lucis scrutinio" ["An Examination of Light"]: "Efficit et secum sic cecus habit sibi cecum" ["And a man thus blind has with him one blind to himself"] (line 12). Gower, *The Minor Latin Works*, 12–13.

Against these negative images of metaphorical blindness is the blind soothsayer (literally, truth-speaker), an archetype on which Gower models his persona. His words not corrupted by desire, this blind man is more discreet with his aim than blind Cupid. Tiresias is an example of this judicious blind man in the *Confessio*. Granted, Tiresias was prone to excite the gods' anger—first when he "destourbed" copulating snakes and next when he "withoute avisement / Agein Juno gaf juggement."[51] His blindness was Juno's retribution for his ill-advised decision. Nevertheless, Jupiter compensated Tiresias's truth-to-power-telling and consequent blindness with a gift: "a sothseiere he was forevere," a compensation which, in fact, is no compensation at all, since it merely declares as true what was already true.[52] In Gower's retelling, Tiresias's blindness is both the consequence and the guarantee of his telling the truth. By establishing this positive valence for the blinded truth-teller in the *Confessio*, Gower provides a precedent for judging his own blindness as the consequence of his sharp-eyed satire and as the warrant the Trentham verse will also be devoted to the truth. His age-related, natural blindness suggests he is no longer distracted by amorous urges; his word can be trusted because he has "achieved sagacity . . . arrived at through maturation of the mental faculties, his perspectives earned and tested after surviving the world's snares."[53] While his blindness forces him to husband his efforts so that his words are distilled into the purest prayers, it also guarantees his continuing

51. Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 3.373 and 3.751–52.

52. Ibid., 3.761.

53. R. F. Yeager, "Gower in Winter," in *The Medieval Python: The Purposive and Provocative Work of Terry Jones*, ed. R. F. Yeager and Toshiyuki Takamiya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 92; Dieter Mehl, "Old Age in Middle English Literature: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain-Poet," in *Old Age and Ageing in British and American Culture and Literature*, ed. Christa Jansohn (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 29.

commitment to truth.[54] Unlike the fallen social body, this impairment needs no compensatory prosthesis. It is its own compensation. Indeed, the manuscript's final poem, "Henrici quarti primus," presents Gower's blindness not as a disability, but as a rhetorical prosthesis, the means by which he asserts his own legitimacy as the king's advisor. Rather than undermining Gower's goal to counsel the king through his verse, his blindness works towards that goal. The younger, sighted poets can pen frivolities, he declares. Old and blind, he will concern himself only with the most important matters: his short final prayer appeals to God for the kingdoms' welfare.[55]

Despite Gower's specifically dating the onset of his blindness (in "Henrici quarti primus" he ties it to the first year of Henry's reign), we have reason to wonder if his blindness is less literal than it might initially appear. The Latin verse in which Gower announces his failing eyesight survives in three versions distinct enough to be considered three separate poems. The poems' most recent editor, R. F. Yeager, notes the striking irony of having three versions of a farewell to verse and rightly wonders how absolute were Gower's blindness and his consequent inability to write. Without diminishing the difficulty of limited sight, we do well to remember that age-related blindness does not occur all at once, and sight is generally lost incrementally. It would have been normal for him to have retained "the ability to distinguish light from darkness . . . [or] to perceive light, color, form, and movement to some degree."[56] Moreover, losing his eyesight would not have prevented Gower from dictating to an amanuensis, a possibility he

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54. Gower, "Henrici quarti primus," lines 11–12.

55. Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 166–67.

56. Georgina Kleege, "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 396.

suggests in lines 11-12 of the All Souls version of "Quicquid homo scribat."[57] With this possibility in mind, we can understand Gower's repeated reminders of his blindness as a deliberate, "conscious pose for literary purposes," compelling readers to "think beyond the ideological horizon of ability" and to consider blindness a sign of his new social location.[58] By taking advantage of the social identity that blindness constructs for him, Gower lets his blindness be an index pointing in two directions: toward the wisdom of his years and toward the frailty of his body.

Textual Disability: MS Trentham Dismantled

Currently, no modern edition of the Trentham poems allows for easy re-assemblage of the original compilation, thereby making it nearly impossible to see the series of prostheses and their relationships to the two impairments presented within the poems, late-medieval England's disfigured social body and Gower's blindness. When viewed through the medical model of disability theory, the corrections and reconfigurations inflicted by editors create a disability where originally there was none. When the Trentham poems are read outside the context of that manuscript compilation, the new context either distorts or eliminates their relationships created by juxtapositions and the manuscript's visual presentation. Because all these visual elements work to attenuate differences permeating the texts—different languages, different poems, different genres—removing those unifying textual markers allows the differences to dominate. Moreover, the edited versions of the poems frequently are not those found in MS Trentham.

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57. Gower, *The Minor Latin Works*, 48-49.

58. Yeager, "Gower in Winter: Last Poems," 97; Tobin Siebers, "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 319.

Versions of poems normalized via multiple witnesses presuppose that a correct version exists and conclude that the Trentham texts must be deformed. Therefore, the signs of Gower's effort to assert his moral authority and his solutions to England's dysfunctional social body become occluded when the compilation itself becomes thus disabled. No wonder MS Trentham, with its three languages, multiple genres, and diverse perspectives on the social body, has been seen as a jumble rather than a fitting summation of Gower's career comparable to the three volumes cushioning his effigy's head in Southwark Cathedral.

The way the Trentham poems work together suffers when changes are made to the manuscript in the form of textual prostheses meant to correct perceived deformities. Paradoxically, because the prostheses end up distorting what is there, the "corrected" text is actually a more corrupted text. The first of these textual additions can be traced to the early sixteenth century. One set of these is fairly innocent and does not cause problems with the manuscript's reception. For instance, the "Rychemond" signature attributed to Henry VII seems a bit exciting until we realize it is in a sixteenth-century hand; then it is merely intriguing.[59] Nor is the manuscript's reception distorted by the curious autographs of an unidentified "William Sanders" or an enthusiastic "Charles Geddes."[60] And it is difficult to believe that someone sought to improve the manuscript by ripping out a leaf or tearing gashes from another.[61] But another set of deformations sought to improve the manuscript and in the process began the prostheticizing process that eventually disabled rather than aided the Trentham compilation. The effort to dress up the manuscript by trimming pages frustrates by cutting off some marginalia's

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59. MS Trentham, f.2v.

60. Ibid., f.40r.

61. See note 3.

letters. And when someone glued a small leaf describing the manuscript's provenance, Gower's credentials as "Poeta Anglicus," and his relationship with Geoffrey Chaucer, the parchment addendum casts the compilation and its poems back into Chaucer's shadow. Up to this point, though, the poems themselves were left untouched; only the manuscript has suffered.

The tenor of the emendations changed in 1818 when George Granville-Leveson Gower reproduced MS Trentham's contents selectively; subsequent editorial practices further extend those unkind cuts. When modern editions break apart the compilation, artificially reorganize its contents by language, and print a standard version, they parallel modern medical models of disability that treat the nonstandard as "a deficit or pathology that requires correction or care."[62] Begun by Macaulay in his early-twentieth-century edition, this practice removes the verse from its context and changes its content. MS Trentham visually aligns the poems by using stanzas that appear similar; it also uses the same spacing separating stanzas within the same poem as the spacing of stanzas in other poems. Modern editions, on the other hand, separate the poems by giving them titles, setting them in multiple font sizes, and placing them adjacent to other poems in the same language. While modern editions may note and reference the missing verse links between poems that appear in the original manuscript, a curious reader often has to turn to another volume to find those links. Not only do these detours interrupt the reading sequence apparently designed by Gower, but they also erase the manuscript's assumption of the reader's easy movement from one language to another, an assumption casually manifest in the Bedford Psalter-Hours' bilingual label to the Gower portrait and numerous other manuscript

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62. Wheatley, "Medieval Constructions of Blindness," 64.

compilations.[63] Rather than attending to Yeager's reminder that MS Trentham addresses a king

conversant and literate in all three tongues, modern editions harden the fluid linguistic

distinctions among the compilation's poems.[64] By eliminating the easy movement from one

language to the next, dividing the poems by languages dims any notion that Gower perceived

England's three languages and their literatures to be in conversation with one another (and with

those on the continent) and reifies instead the truism that the three insular languages were in

competition, uneasily awaiting the day English would oust the other two.[65] Finally, when the

Trentham verses are separated, readers can easily forget that Gower's final extant compilation

veered not toward the English vernacular, but toward the French stitched together with Latin.[66]

Sequestering Gower's verse into monolingual volumes also privileges one version of any

given poem—the version which is purported to be Gower's final intention and which is not

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63. Sylvia Wright, "The Author Portraits in the Bedford Psalter-Hours: Gower, Chaucer and Hoccleve," *The British Library Journal* 18 (1992): 192; Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, 234-265; Butterfield, "Fuzziness and Perceptions of Language in the Middle Ages, Part 1 ('Explosive Fuzziness: The Duel')," *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 255–266; Butterfield, "Fuzziness and Perceptions of Language in the Middle Ages, Part 2 ('Collective Fuzziness: Three Treaties and a Funeral')," *Common Knowledge* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 51–64; Butterfield, "Fuzziness and Perceptions of Language in the Middle Ages, Part 3 ('Translating Fuzziness: Countertexts')," *Common Knowledge* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 466–473.

64. Yeager, "Politics and the French Language," 150; Brian Merriless and Heather Pagan, "John Barton, John Gower and Other: Variation in Late Anglo-French," in *Language and Culture in Medieval Britain: The French of England, c. 1100–c.1500*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (York: York Medieval Press, 2009), 123–34.

65. A. G. Rigg and Edward S. Moore, "The Latin Works: Politics, Lament, and Praise," in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Sîan Echard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 164.

66. Yeager, "Politics and the French Language in England During the Hundred Years' War: The Case of John Gower," 2000. For a similar argument, see Siân Echard, "Gower's 'Bookes of Latin': Language, Politics, and Poetry," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 154–156.

necessarily the Trentham version. Despite evidence that Gower supervised the compilation of these poems into a purposeful whole, it is difficult to reconstruct the texts and their sequence without recourse to the manuscript itself.[67] Modern editions dim or remove other codicologial information designed to guide and enhance the reading experience, such as rubricated letters marking the relationship of stanzas to one another throughout the compilation. The reader sees neither these carefully crafted connections nor the way juxtaposing "particular passages in particular languages" creates meaning.[68] By ignoring the manuscript and reading only "corrected" reconstructions, we encounter a dismantled and deformed text.

Only recently have the poems in MS Trentham been studied together; yet, even then, scholars have often cobbled together the sequence using modern editions, thereby relying on decontextualized and overcorrected texts. But the manuscript's presentation needs to remain as important as all these other reading aids. The forces normally taken to be the disabling of manuscripts—the ravages of time, misuse, and being ignored—are not always the most significant culprits. Even the added marginalia and appendages—the efforts to supplement what time has taken away—are not nearly as destructive as pulling the poems outside their manuscript

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67. For instance, Yeager's valuable editions of the Latin and the French verse do not always make clear the complicated relationships of verse in MS Trentham. When his notes report that four lines of the Penitential Psalms follow "O Recolende," that is only partially correct. The mangled manuscript version of "O Recolende" stops after eight lines at the bottom of f.11v. The top of f.12r begins with the four-line "H. aquile pullus," which is then followed by Vulgate Psalms 88:23 and 40:3. The appearance of "H. aquile pullus" in that sequence is not insignificant.

68. Tim William Machan, "Medieval Multilingualism and Gower's Literary Practice," *Studies in Philology* 103, no. 1 (2006): 13.

context. What the distance of time dims, editorial prostheticizing renders nearly invisible. Because the Trentham manuscript is now digitized, scholars can study it with all its deformities, real and supposed—the missing leaf, the torn page, the cut edges, and especially the Trentham versions often mislabeled as variants. These digital reproductions bear their own scars, but they provide an excellent supplement that sits well alongside other contemporary editorial prostheses.

Conclusion

Viewing MS Trentham through the interpretive lens of disability theories allows us to rethink the relationship between impairment and modes of correcting, supplementing, and replacing what has been deemed unfit. Because these theories encourage us to revisit what we might otherwise discard, we see anew manuscript compilations filled with poems deemed to be variants. Because *disability* resonates in multiple levels simultaneously, the concept provides a nodal point where we can connect the poet, content, and the material text and can see how these sites of impairment move among various roles, including simultaneous roles as disability and prosthesis.

This interpretive process can also reveal what medieval texts offer disability studies. Because medieval texts such as MS Trentham make legible what disability theorist Tobin Siebers has identified as the "ideology of ability," Gower's collection and its underlying legal argument demonstrate the unnaturalness of the perfectly formed social body, with all parts working in harmony and in balance.[69] Achieving that ideal requires extensive scaffolding by a legal system that grows ever more complex as the social body grows. By extending disability studies to include metaphorical and material impairments, we can see that defining a disability

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69. Siebers, "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment," 316.

requires we recognize its fluid nature, that the body is an amalgamation of varying states of disability functioning as a whole, and that what constitutes a disability is highly subjective and socially situated. Because MS Trentham allows us to experience the innate affiliation between disability and prosthesis, brokenness and repair, disease and cure, deformity and correction, it helps unhinge the many binaries disability studies seek to resist. Sometimes we find the tension between disability and prosthesis confined to the (dis)ability itself so that a (latent) ability is embedded within the (dis)ability; Gower's blindness is an example of this. At other times, the disability requires a prosthesis; Henry IV's needing legal argumentation to justify his usurpation is such an example. Or the disability allows for (but does not necessarily require) a prosthesis; the unstable body politic made a space for Henry's invasion, and the mangled manuscript (or the perceived insufficiency of juvenile English) justified editorial interventions where none were really needed. Or there is no disability until the prosthesis is added, such as we find in the editorial separation of the trilingual production. In short, MS Trentham (itself an effort at unifying disparate parts) demonstrates the inherent fantasy in wholeness, completion, wellness, and perfection. Without blindness, Gower's voice is muted; without a crippled body politic, the Trentham compilation is not instigated; and without a dismantled MS Trentham, this essay would remain unwritten.

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