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Disability as Metaphor and Lived Experience in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*

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Disability studies scholars often champion the investigation of the lived experiences of disability over metaphor. In *Disability Theory*, for instance, Tobin Siebers historicizes disabled bodies in part because metaphor often converts disability into something else.¹ Given the exclusionary nature of ableist metaphors, Siebers adopts this approach for good reason. I would argue, however, that we are at a point now in eighteenth-century literary disability studies in which we can do both; that is, we can uncover lived experiences of disability in the eighteenth century *and* we can take metaphor seriously. By juxtaposing literary representations of ableist metaphor with dynamic, three-dimensional portrayals of disability, we may conceptualize how disability was often imagined as deprivation but also how it could serve personally and socially transformative ends in narrative. To show how such a method works, I examine Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762): two novels that portray physical disability in starkly different terms. *Pamela* conceives of deformity as a plot device while *Millenium Hall* reveals how socially constructed

bodily standards subjugate disabled people.² Despite their differences, these novels depict disability and queerness as transformative narrative devices for imagining social and sexual reform.

In *Pamela*, Richardson shores up the able-bodied, heterosexual romance between Pamela and Mr. B. through Mrs. Jewkes, who is portrayed as monstrous in her embodiment and queer desire. In its plot development, *Pamela* adheres to the tenets of what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder call "narrative prosthesis," or a transhistorical representational model in which disability serves as a "crutch" for generating plot conflict and resolution.³ According to the tenets of narrative prosthesis, "the materiality of metaphor" is the tendency of narrative to make abstract concepts visible in the disabled body, which are first uncovered and then explained and justified. As a result, disability is brought from the margins to the heart of the narrative before it is finally rehabilitated, fixed, or eradicated.⁴ In *Pamela*, Mrs. Jewkes's disability and queerness work together as narrative prostheses to ground Richardson's conceptions of libertinism, female virtue, and sentiment. For example, upon first meeting Mrs. Jewkes, Pamela describes her in these terms: "She is a broad, squat, pousy, fat Thing, quite ugly. ... She has a huge Hand, and an Arm as thick as my waist. ... Her nose is flat and crooked, and her Brows grow over her Eyes; a dead, spiteful, grey, goggling Eye, to be sure, she has. And her Face is flat and broad."⁵ Mrs. Jewkes is also said "to waddle" when she walks, indicating a mobility impairment that would appear to supplement her monstrous body and intentions (*PA*, 114). Pamela's portrayal of Mrs. Jewkes reveals physiognomic thought, in which an unconventional appearance mirrors inward depravity. Pamela's caricature of Mrs. Jewkes's facial features—the sustained attention to her "flat and crooked" nose and eyebrows—is supposed to reveal her inner wickedness (114). Pamela construes Mrs. Jewkes's face as a metaphorical repository of uncouthness that threatens young women's virtue.

Mrs. Jewkes's character also symbolizes the libertine sexuality that Richardson hopes to expunge from British society. Mrs. Jewkes pursues Pamela aggressively, just as Mr. B. does. In these characters' alignment, Mrs. Jewkes's deformity becomes a metaphor for Mr. B.'s sexual excess. Pamela describes her first meeting with Mrs. Jewkes in these terms: "The naughty Woman came up to me with an Air of Confidence, and kiss'd me, See Sister, said she, here's a charming Creature! would not she tempt the best Lord in the Land to run away with her!" (*PA*, 107). Mrs. Jewkes justifies Mr. B.'s ignominious actions by calling attention to Pamela's desirability. Later, in the carriage ride to Lincolnshire, Pamela reports that Mrs. Jewkes sat next to her, "squeezing my Hand, and saying, Why you are very pretty, my silent Dear! and once she offer'd to kiss me. But I said, I don't like this Sort of Carriage, Mrs. Jewkes; it is not like two Persons of one Sex" (108). In this and in other passages, Mrs. Jewkes becomes a grotesque, queer symbol of tyranny, conflated with the power and violence that Mr. B. asserts over Pamela. Her advances on Pamela's person are reminiscent of Mr. B., whom she eventually assists in an attempted rape of Pamela. Mrs. Jewkes absorbs much of the blame for Mr. B.'s actions, making his conversion to a man of feeling seem plausible as she can be dispensed with handily in the narrative. Once Pamela and Mr. B. are in a good place to marry, Pamela's description of Mrs. Jewkes's peculiar bodily features falls out of view. Mrs. Jewkes at last becomes virtuously disembodied, even as the details of a novel heteronormative order get established around Pamela's virtue and Mr. B.'s newly acquired sentiment. We might say that *Pamela* indicates a hetero-abled future and that Pamela's imprisonment at the hands of a crip/queer character serves as a threat to that future. Richardson asserts a hetero-abled temporality in large part by imagining Mrs. Jewkes's body as material metaphor.

In its portrayal of queer and disabled bonds as viable alternatives to heterosexual, able-bodied union, Scott's *Millenium Hall* offers a vastly different account of corporeality from that of *Pamela*. Through her criticism of the "common standard" that stigmatizes and isolates so many individuals, Scott imagines physical disability as inevitable and therefore as that which ought to be accommodated in any community.⁶ In *Millenium Hall*, disability is what Tobin Siebers would call "complexly embodied"—that is, Scott represents impaired bodies as "possessing both social and physical form."⁷ Impairment, in other words, is not merely a metaphor for Scott as it

is for Richardson; rather, it is a source of both social *and* physical pain, and it serves as the basis for her restructuring of British society. Scott achieves this in *Millenium Hall* through various means, but I focus here on her critique of the socially driven nature of bodily norms.

When showing George Ellison and Lamont around the estate's enclosure, Mrs. Mancel shares her thoughts about Procrustes, the figure from Greek mythology whose metal bed served a violent purpose. After inviting unwitting guests into his home, Procrustes would tie them to his bed and either stretch their limbs if they were too short or amputate their legs if they were too tall. Mrs. Mancel reflects upon the impact of such subjective standards on disabled people: "But is not every man a Procrustes? We have not the power of shewing our cruelty exactly in the same method, but actuated by the like spirit, we abridge of their liberty, and torment by scorn, all who either fall short, or exceed the usual standard" (*MH*, 72). In using qualifiers like "usual" and, as she does shortly thereafter, "common," Mrs. Mancel draws attention to the violence of arbitrary corporeal ideals on the bodies and minds of individuals in British society (72–73). As rejoinder to such a model, Scott represents the various characters who populate the novel's titular estate as complexly embodied. Their appearance unsettles those standards; it also indicates a future in which personal fulfillment is reliant upon the building of robust communities that diminish individualism in the service of a communal living that is class-stratified.

Metaphors can function as a screen. That is why we cannot only consider examples like Mrs. Jewkes. But metaphors are also illuminating. They shed light on disability in different historical and cultural moments. We can recognize Scott as an extraordinary theorist of the body by understanding the metaphorical grain against which she wrote. We should take disability metaphor seriously because it constructs ableist ideology through language that disavows disability. By attending to disability as metaphor, we can examine the ways in which a canonical literary text like *Pamela* adheres to ableist tropes that shore up the primacy of heterosexuality. And we can also conceptualize how narratives from the eighteenth century that represent impairment as complexly embodied imagine social reform. Together, Richardson's use of corporeal metaphor in *Pamela* and Scott's rendering of complex embodiment in *Millenium Hall* allow for an expansive understanding of how physical disability was socially constituted and lived during the eighteenth century.

Jason S. Farr is assistant professor of English at Marquette University. His book, *Novel Bodies: Disability and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, was published by Bucknell University Press in 2019.

Notes

1. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).
2. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 47.
3. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 49.
4. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 61–64.
5. Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 114, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *PA*.
6. Sarah Scott, *Millenium Hall*, ed. Gary Kelly (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995), 73, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *MH*.
7. Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 30.