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Disability Humor and the Meanings of Impairment in Early Modern England

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Among the jokes in *A Hundred Merry Tales* (1526), often regarded as one of the first native English jest books, was a story that described an encounter between a courtier and a carter. In the paradoxical style made fashionable by Renaissance humanists, the courtier “in derision praised the carter’s back, legs, and other members of his body marvelously,” meticulously ridiculing every aspect of the man’s deformed frame. After enduring this humiliation, the carter told the courtier that there was “another property” of his body that he had failed to notice. Looking “aside over his shoulder upon the courtier,” the carter told him, “Lo, Sir, this is my property, I have a wall eye [squint] in my head,” a sensory imperfection that in fact gave him a clear-eyed view of the character defects of others, “for I never look over my shoulder this wise but I lightly espy a knave.”¹

Humor provides an intriguing insight into representations of disability in the early modern period. The treatment of disability as a source of laughter is one way in which scholars have demarcated attitudes toward disabled people in premodern societies from those of “enlightened” modernity. Mockery of ugliness, disfigurement, or deformity is often taken as evidence of the “unkindness” with which physical difference was treated in preindustrial societies.² However, this kind of comic production has received relatively little analysis in its own right.³ Focusing on physical and sensory

deviations from the normative, this chapter uses a variety of prose jest books produced in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England to explore how disability humor shaped meanings of embodied difference. Although jokes have historically worked to denigrate disabled people by exaggerating their “otherness,” the ludicrous possibilities of joking situations gave humor the potential to interrogate conventional wisdom about bodily norms. In the early modern period, as we shall see, comic narratives might invoke disability in a variety of contexts, to explore issues around the causes of disability and the social experiences of disabled people, as well as to explore a wider range of concerns, including gender and authority.

Existing scholarship paints a largely negative portrait of the treatment of disability in early modern popular culture. Since ancient times, deformity had occupied a central place in theories of laughter.⁴ Thomas Hoby’s 1561 translation of Baldassare Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* explained that “laughing matters arise of . . . a certain deformitie or ill favourednesse, because a man laugheth onlie at those matters that are disagreeing in themselves.”⁵ In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes famously extended this connection in his description of laughter as “sudden glory” caused “by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another by comparison whereof” people “suddenly applaud themselves.”⁶ Although “deformity” was intended to be interpreted broadly, drawing on Aristotle’s definition of the “ugly” as an exaggerated version of the self, and referring as much to follies of character and vices as it did to physical anomaly, there can be no doubt that “deformed” or disabled bodies were ripe for comic exploitation. Deformity’s association with sin and corruption made the impaired body a powerful image in lampoons, satires, and defamatory verses, perhaps most famously those produced in the aftermath of the death of Robert Cecil in 1612, in which the former Lord Chancellor’s “crooked” back came to symbolize a range of faults, from political corruption to adultery.⁷ As a corollary, historians and literary scholars have pointed to the ways in which the deaf, blind, “crippled,” aged, and “ugly” were routinely presented as figures of derision in the period’s popular culture. For example, in his study of mid-eighteenth-century jest books Simon Dickie argues that disabled people were “standing jokes . . . almost automatic figures of fun”; running contrary to the humanitarian forces of the Enlightenment, which increasingly cast disabled people as objects of pity and sympathy. Laughter at such jokes may have served as a “safety valve,” as a means of discharging the fears of the able-bodied about physical degeneration, while simultaneously asserting their superiority over the “otherness” of “deformed” and impaired people.⁸

There can be no doubt that in the early modern period (as today) jests could be cruel toward disabled people. But this derisive treatment needs to

be examined more closely and put into context. Although Roger Lund has shown how certain nonstandard bodies, especially “crooked” forms, especially lent themselves to mockery in the eighteenth century thanks to their offense to aesthetic sensibilities, there has been little attempt to assess the similarities and differences in the comic portrayal of different types of physical and sensory disability in the early modern period as a whole.⁹ Consequently, existing scholarship tends to view jokes involving disabled characters in a rather uniform way, as automatically raising the same kind of mocking laughter. As Dickie suggests, a good deal may be learned by exploring the discursive strategies by which certain physical signs—a withered leg, a crooked back—were represented in a comic way.¹⁰ Furthermore, recent work on eighteenth-century humor regards cruel jokes at the expense of nonstandard bodies as a remnant of older comic forms that survived the “civilizing process” of the Enlightenment.¹¹

Yet the portrayal of disability in jest books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—and its social and cultural context—remains relatively unexplored. Renaissance handbooks of “civility” were just as concerned with the propriety of laughing at physical difference as their Enlightenment counterparts. Authors of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century guides to gentlemanly conduct frequently condemned the incivility of jesting that mocked others in company or put them ill at ease.¹² According to della Casa’s *Galateo*, “they that scoffe at any man, that is Deformed, ill shapen, leane, little, or a Dwarfes” were “unworthy to beare the name of an honest gentleman.”¹³ As the joke that began this chapter illustrates, the mockery of physical difference was not entirely unquestioned in jest books themselves. Ultimately in that story the tables are turned, the humble carter has the last laugh, using his visual impairment to deliver a killer line that stops his arrogant social superior in his tracks. The moral was clear: “By this tale a man may see that he that used to deride and mock other folks is sometimes himself more derided and mocked.”¹⁴ As this chapter will show, although jest books frequently ignored warnings against using deformity or other forms of bodily anomaly as a pretext for laughter, it is by no means evident that all disabled figures were “automatic figures of fun.” Rather than exploring jests purely in terms of their function, the emphasis of this analysis is on the various ways in which authors tried to make disability or deformity funny, and what these narratives tell us about disability discourse in the early modern period.

However, jest books present problems of interpretation. Repeating, adapting, and often plagiarizing material from other collections or foreign and historical sources, jest books are problematic sources for examining “attitudes” toward disability in early modern England since it is often difficult to ascertain whose “attitudes” they were reflecting, or indeed how they were

read. Indeed, some of the common themes of this literature, such as the cruel gulling of blind people or the stereotype of the greedy or false disabled mendicant, have their antecedents in medieval ballads, farces, and fabliaux.¹⁵ Late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century jest books ranged in style from relatively short biographical accounts of trickster figures printed in black letter type to lengthier collections of jokes and epigrams that, judging from the sophistication of some of their allusions, may have envisioned an educated middling or elite audience.¹⁶ As Dickie concedes, the popularity of derisive treatments of the old, “deformed,” and disabled in eighteenth-century jest books may have been due to the fact that the comic world of the jest provided a license to laugh at subjects no longer deemed acceptable in polite society. The enjoyment of a comic story was different from taunting a “cripple” or blind beggar in the street.¹⁷ Rather than viewing jests as straightforward reflections of societal “attitudes,” or of social practices concerning disability, it may be more helpful to see them as participants in a debate about different meanings of disability, as attempts to provide a framework through which to interpret bodily differences by exploring the ludicrous possibilities of the body’s excesses and deficits.

THE BODY’S manifold opportunities for evoking laughter are well documented in Anthony Copley’s *Wits, Fits and Fancies: Or, a Generall and Serious Collection of the Sententious Speeches, Answers, Jestes and Behaviour of all Sortes of Estate, from the Throne to the Cottage* (1614), which provides a useful starting point for this discussion. The comedy of corporeality was represented by jests about “Face and Skarres,” beards, noses, extremes of bodily size and appearance, “of Fat and Grosse” and “of Leanes” and “of Talness and Littlenes,” of “blindness,” and also “crookedness and lameness.” Although “crookedness” and “lameness” might proceed from a variety of causes and have different effects, they were yoked together by the author of this and other jest books. They were categorized as markers of physical difference akin to other extremities of excess or deficit such as fatness, thinness, tallness, or shortness, rather than as “disabilities” that conferred a special identity on their bearer. First and foremost, the “crooked” or “lame” body provided an opportunity for authors of jests to prove their verbal creativity through the production of puns and word play.¹⁸ Contrasts between normative “straight” or “upright” bodies and deviant “crooked” ones were particularly common. In one jest, the Duke of Medina Celi, “having a crooked back’d lady to his wife,” asked a jester for his opinion on his “stately new hall at Madredejos,” to which he replied that it was indeed “a stately hall . . . and . . . tall, yet can-

not . . . your Lady stand upright therein.” In another story, a “crookback’d plaintiff” at law asked the judge in his case to “see him right” (which also meant to straighten); the judge replied, “Wel may I heare you, but right I cannot doe ye.” In a variation on this theme, “One quarrelling with a lame man, threatned that he would set his foot straight ere he had don[e].” The “lame” man answered, “In so doing I will accompt you my friend” for restoring his body to a normative state.¹⁹

As a hybrid of the familiar and the strange, the disabled body was a fertile topic for witty wordplay, extended metaphor, and comic resemblances. In *Wits, Fits and Fancies*, “One seeing a very misshapen and crooked person in the streete said, that he had a Camell to his nurse.”²⁰ Dwarfs were sometimes referred to as “apes,” and other deformed or crooked people as “monkeys.”²¹ Such analogies marked out deformity as stigma, a spoiled identity that threatened to contaminate the integrity of the species itself.²² The notion that a “crooked” body might be formed in the maternal nurturing of a human by a camel placed this reading of the nonstandard body in the context of species pollution, at a time when animal cross-breeding was a recognized phenomenon.²³ In this way, “dwarfs” and the “crooked” seemed to question the status of humanity. Misshapen bodies also resembled the devil.²⁴ The Norfolk gentleman Sir Nicholas Le Strange recorded in his manuscript jest book a tale of a Cambridge “Scholler that had very deformed legs and Feete,” who, when he revealed his feet to a shoemaker, caused the artisan to startle “as if the Divell had offerd him his cloven foote.”²⁵

This blurring of boundaries between human and animal, and the role of the supernatural, drew on ideas familiar from early modern accounts of monstrous births.²⁶ However, other jests drew analogies between “crooked” or impaired bodies and mundane, everyday objects. A hunched back was likened to a person carrying a load; a blind eye was described as a shuttered window.²⁷ The joke in which the straight lines of architecture were contrasted with the house’s “crooked” occupier who could not “stand upright” within it served to describe the “deformed” body as lacking in order, form, and symmetry, an “error” of creation or manufacture rather than a prodigious wonder. In another example, “One seeing a man of excellent learning, crooked and deformed in body, said, Lord, what a *poor Cottage doth yonder good wit inhabit*.”²⁸ By drawing a distinction between the man’s qualities of mind and the “deformed” body he “inhabited,” the jest presented a challenge to thinking about bodily anomaly that viewed deformity as an index of the mind. As Bacon pointed out in his essay “Of Deformity,” in spite of there being a natural “consent between the body and the mind,” “deformed” people might, “if they be of spirit,” prove to be “excellent persons,” as Aesop,

Socrates, and other historical notables proved.²⁹ Thus, while some jests might exploit familiar connections between the “deformed” and the “monstrous,” others might use different analogies to suggest that such associations were not inevitable.

While the treatment of the non-normative in jests shared common features, different types of impairment were the occasion for different types of comic scenario. The ways in which deaf people might mishear others and provide inappropriate responses in conversation provided much amusement, particularly by showing the permeable boundaries between civility and rudeness. *A Banquet of Jeasts* (1630) described how a young gentleman had, in order to make his dinner companions “merry,” made a mock toast to his deaf “hostesse,” drinking to her “and all her friends,” namely, “the Bawdes and Whores in *Turnebull Street*,” to which the woman returned thanks, “I know you remember your Mother, your Aunt, and those good Gentlewomen your sisters.”³⁰ Sir Nicholas Le Strange recorded several variations on this theme, perhaps with the aim of using them to delight guests at his own table. In one, which he attributed to his father, Thomas Getting had “dranke to an old woman here one Christmas, and instead of a Drinking salutation, sayd, kisse mine arse Besse,” to which she “being very Deafe, and suspecting no ill, answered, I thanke you hartily Thomas; and Dorothy too I pray (which was Thomas Getting’s wife).” In another (supplied by his mother), Sir Henry Sidney was said to have toasted an old, deaf woman with the phrase “Ile be your bedfellow this night,” to which she replied, “I thanke your good Worshipp, with all my Hart, Sir you know what’s good for an old Woman.”³¹

The bawdiness of these jokes, and their focus on the impairments of elderly, deaf women in particular, show ways in which jests might employ disability to reinforce the dominant misogyny of early modern humor. The sexuality of elderly and disabled individuals was considered transgressive, and laughter at jokes of this kind may have served to restore normative values that classified desire as the prerogative of the young and physically whole. In jests about sex, marriage, and cuckoldry hierarchies of disablement were mapped onto hierarchies of domestic authority, in the process revealing how the meanings of impairment might be distinctly gendered.³² It was a familiar adage that a deaf husband, unable to hear his wife’s scolding, and a blind wife, unable to see her husband’s faults, made for a “peaceable life in marriage.”³³ Other disabilities were presented as assisting in women’s subjection. A young gentleman being asked “what he meant to marry so deafe a Gentlewoman” replied, “Because I hop’d she was also dumbe.”³⁴

Yet, while it was suggested (albeit ironically) that deaf men might enjoy relatively peaceful marriages, in many cases physical or sensory disability

was seen to compromise men's authority. In the domestic economy of early modern England men's disability might lead to a renegotiation of household roles and division of labor, giving their wives greater responsibility in the running of homes and businesses, and in controlling resources.³⁵ According to Lindsey Row-Heyveld, the perception of disability as "effeminizing" grew in the late sixteenth century as pre-Reformation notions of disability as a spiritually ennobling condition, and the spiritual practice whereby the disabled poor might sell prayers or affirmations of salvation, were swept away by religious reformers and harsher regimes of social welfare that cast many disabled people as passive objects of charity.³⁶ Patriarchal authority rested on a fundamental assumption of able-bodiedness. As Alexandra Shepard has shown, men in early modern England did not benefit equally from the "patriarchal dividend," and cuckold jokes regularly underscored male anxieties about the ways in which their authority might be diminished through their own bodily shortcomings or deficits by casting wronged husbands as infirm or disabled.³⁷ Sexual impotence, a common cause of wifely infidelity in early modern cuckold jokes, was itself described as a physical impairment or "defect," a handicap that compromised men's ability to control their wives.³⁸ The stereotypical victim of cuckolding, the elderly man married to a young woman, had his horning "justified" by reference to his physical infirmities.

For example, the seventeenth-century ballad *The Cuckold's Calamity, Or the Old Usurer Plunder'd out of his Gold by His Young Wife*, has the husband lament, "Oh! She took me for my gold, tho' I'm goughy, lame and old."³⁹ The susceptibility of blind husbands to cuckolding was a theme found in medieval texts such as Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, and early modern jests similarly reflected on the dangers of visual impairment to men's sexual honor.⁴⁰ *Wits, Fits and Fancies* related a tale of "an honest man that had but one eie and a queane to his wife" who was in bed with a "knave" one evening when he returned home. Hearing her husband's voice, the woman hid her lover and bade her husband enter the bedchamber, telling him that she had had a dream in which his sight had been restored. In order to see whether it was true, she placed her hand over his "seeing eie," asking him whether he could "discern any thing with the other," providing the cover that allowed her lover to escape.⁴¹

The juxtaposition of different types of impairment was another common theme in jest books.⁴² This was partly a reflection of the incongruity that many early modern jests used to achieve their comic effect: if disabled characters might be considered objects of mockery in their own right, then the yoking together of "opposite" types of bodily difference such as blind-

ness and lameness, or people of small stature with the exceedingly tall, might enhance the comic spectacle. But juxtaposition also emphasized the incompleteness of disabled bodies that prevented disabled characters from being fully accepted as persons in their own right. In jest books and other writings the contrast between sensory and physical disabilities provides a means of exploring the qualities of mind and body. William Basse's *Helpe to Discourse* (1619), which mixed jests with questions and answers on more serious topics, used a story about a blind man and a "cripple" to answer the questions of whether the soul or the body "have the greater hand in sinne, and why for the sinne of the one they should be together jointly punished." The owner of an orchard, it related, had two keepers, "one of the which is lame, and the other blinde." The "cripple" spotted some golden apples hanging on a tree and desired for himself, but not being able to take them, lacking "legges to beare him to them," he asked his blind companion for help. Having established that the blind man "would not sticke [i.e., hesitate] to pull the apples if [he] had but . . . eyes to see them," they hatched a scheme to take the fruit. Riding on the blind man's shoulders, the "cripple" was able to snatch the apples, which the two men ate. Upon discovery of the theft, the master of the orchard "punisheth both with one equall punishment as they had both deserved." Thus the story gave the example that the "wise Governour exempt neither body nor soule, because they both lend their furtherance to sinne."⁴³ The incompleteness and physical or sensory deficits of the two men provided serviceable metaphors for the body and soul and for showing their interdependence. Aphra Behn similarly made the contrast between physical and sensory disability central to her novel *The Dumb Virgin* (1700), which focused on the rivalry between two disabled sisters—the witty yet "deformed" Belvideera and the beautiful yet mute Maria—for the handsome suitor Dangerfield. Whereas the young women's contrasting disabilities gave Behn the opportunity to compare the appeal of the qualities of mind against the beauties of the body, the plot's tragic and sensational denouement in which Maria gives in to the sexual advances of Dangerfield only to discover that he is her long-lost brother, followed by the deaths of all but Belvideera who is left a miserable recluse, sent out a message once again of the dangerous desires of disabled people.⁴⁴

The juxtaposition of disabled characters in jest books might have taken further inspiration from the alliances between paupers of all kinds—including disabled beggars—that occurred in early modern England. The mutual dependence of blind and physically disabled beggars was noted elsewhere in early modern English culture and society. In 1706, for example, indigent

companions Henry Banford, “a Blind Man,” and William Jones, “a Lame Man,” were indicted at the Old Bailey for highway robbery.⁴⁵ Jest books were interested in the stresses of daily life, and they contributed to a growing body of writing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries concerning encounters with the disabled poor. Although begging was not the sole lens through which authors of jest books approached disability, the mendicancy of the blind and “crippled,” and interactions between beggars and “respectable” pedestrians, provided a context for the discussion of disability in this literature. If authors of conduct literature questioned the “scornful” treatment of the unfortunate in jests, concerns about the veracity of impairments displayed by disabled beggars—which in turn raised questions about the “truth” of all bodily infirmities—appeared to justify some of the cruelest humor at the expense of the impaired. Suspicions about the disabled poor had been present in the Middle Ages, but, according to Row-Heyveld, concerns about imposture intensified during the Reformation. The declining belief in the holiness of poverty and allied notion of disability as a spiritually ennobling condition, which we discussed earlier, together with the exposure of sham disabled mendicants in cony-catching pamphlets, and Tudor welfare legislation that criminalized those “sturdy beggars” who shunned work, served to focus attention on the criminality and imposture of the disabled poor.⁴⁶

In *The Booke of Bulls* (1636), two men “passing the street in a serious discourse” are interrupted by a “dumb man” who “begg’d of them after his mute manner.” Furious at this interruption, one of the men threatened to “kick him” to send him on his way. “O fie,” said his companion, “will you kicke a dumbe man? Is hee dumb, repli’d he, why did he not tell me so then?”⁴⁷ *Oxford Jestes* (1671) related how “one losing one of his arms in the Wars” was refused alms by a passerby who said, “I’ll give you nothing, you are no Gentleman, you cannot shew your arms.”⁴⁸ Demanding that the dumb beggar speak or the maimed soldier “shew arms” reflected a pervasive suspicion about the truth of impairment and the honesty of the disabled poor. The cruelty of these jokes also reflected the violence (threatened or real) used by the authorities to unmask or punish fraudulent disabled beggars. In Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI*, the feigned lameness of the pilgrim at St. Albans, who appears before the king in act 2, scene 1, is revealed when he runs away to escape the beadle’s whip. The powers invested in the authorities, such as magistrates and the officers of London’s Bridewell, to physically search those who were believed to be counterfeiting disabilities or concealing other bodily secrets, together with the whipping that was prescribed as punishment

for vagrants in successive poor law statutes from the late fifteenth century onward, meant that the threat of violence or forced exposure was a constant risk for the disabled poor of early modern England.⁴⁹

But if anxieties about begging and imposture appeared to justify the cruel streak of early modern humor that seems indicative of a “Hobbesian” desire to denigrate the weakness of disabled people, it is also clear that writers used the abject position of disability or deformity to challenge conventional relationships of power or authority. Disabled bodies, like the “grotesque body” Bakhtin described in his study of Rabelais, were an unruly presence on the pages of jest books—as on the streets of early modern London—serving to challenge the orderly standards of the increasingly idealized “classical body” by highlighting the vulnerable corporeality of everyone.⁵⁰ Similarly, Naomi Baker has shown that the ugly or deformed body in its “insistent and uncontrolled corporeality” presented a threat to emerging early modern forms of identity predicated on self-regulation and transcendence of the body.⁵¹ Aforementioned jests in which the civilities of the dining table were mocked by the exploitation of the impediments of deaf guests were one way in which disability might provide a vehicle for satirizing these developing social conventions. Beyond this, the disorderliness of the disabled body, its inability to play by the rules or to follow the script of “normal” expectations, gave impaired characters in jest books the opportunity to challenge authority and turn the tables on those who would mock the afflicted.

For example, the inability of blind people to read others by their deportment or through cultural trappings of status such as dress gave them opportunities, in the world of the jest, to speak truth to power. One jest repeated in seventeenth-century collections concerned a group of courtiers crossing the New Bridge in Paris where they “espied a blind Man with the balls of his eyes so faire that they suspected hee was a counterfeit.” In order to prove this, a duke “being basely borne” told the company he would prove the imposture since “if hee can see hee must needs know mee, he daily sitting here, and I daily passing by, and being a man of eminency.” The nobleman then went up to the beggar “and pulled him by the nose, whereat the beggar roar’d out, and call’d him bastardly rogue.” Thus, said the duke, “he sees perfectly, he could never have known mee so well else,” but in fact “the man indeed was blind, and this onely a vicious speech often in his mouth.”⁵² While placing the encounter in the context of familiar concerns about imposture—which appeared to justify the tweaking of the man’s nose—the aptness of the beggar’s swearing meant that it is the pretensions of the elite that end up being exposed in their true colors. Ultimately the counterfeit is the duke who lacks noble blood by birth, rather than the disabled beggar.

Another example of this kind of humor in which disability mocked the pretensions of those in authority is recorded by Le Strange in an anecdote concerning a “lame fellow at Ipswich” who, being demanded by Bishop Matthew Wren “Why he did not bow at the name of Jesus,” replied, “Why my Lord, [. . .] one knee does bowe but the other will not.” Being asked why not, the man replied, “why because ’tis stiffe and lame.”⁵³ The simple inability of the “lame” body to do what it was commanded encapsulated the difficulties facing Wren in enforcing Laudian church reforms in the Diocese of Norwich during the mid-1630s.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, those who inquired too impertinently into the causes of disability, who patronized the afflicted or acted with incivility toward them, were given short shrift. For instance, in a jest that appeared in *Tales and Quick Answers* (c. 1535) a man who refused to kiss a maid on the grounds that her nose was too long is told by the woman, who “waxing shamefast and angry in her mind (for with his scoff he a little touched her),” that he may kiss her where “I have nary a nose” (i.e., her buttocks).⁵⁵ The jest registered the feelings of the victims of such cruel and unchivalrous behavior and, in the woman’s sharp-witted repartee, showed how a well-judged response might provide a means by which those with nonstandard bodies might revenge themselves on their abusers, in the process restoring their self-worth. In a similar example, a “tall personable man offered to accompany a dwarfe in the streete, saying that the people would the less gaze and wonder at his miserable littlenesse,” to which the “dwarf” answered in riposte, “Rather they will wonder at my folly, to see me leade an Asse along by me, and not ride.”⁵⁶ By the eighteenth century, the “merry cripple” was becoming a more notable feature of jest books and other writings on disability, as stoical good humor, smart repartee, and the ability to be “merry” about one’s own disabilities or deformities, became accepted as an important means of coping with the stigma of physical difference and for making disabled people acceptable to nondisabled society.⁵⁷

JOKES ABOUT the “crippled,” blind, deaf, and “crooked” were a regular feature of jest books of the early modern period. Work on eighteenth-century jest books suggests that this material was ubiquitous, but it is just as important to put this kind of humor into its context, too. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, jests that specifically dealt with impairment, or involved disabled characters, amounted to a small proportion of the total number of jests in this period. Indeed, some well-known late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century collections contained no jokes at all about disability. It was not until later in the seventeenth century when jest books became length-

ier and published in greater volume that jests involving disabled characters became a common feature of this literature. For example, the 1630 edition of Archie Armstrong's *A Banquet of Jeasts* contained only one jest concerning what we might recognize as a "disability"—the joke about the deaf hostess discussed earlier—although it did contain four jests about large or missing noses.⁵⁸ The expanded version of the text published in 1660, however, contained five jests about physical or sensory impairments.⁵⁹ Pressure to include more material may have led to an increase of jests concerning anomalous bodies. Furthermore, the "anti-civility" of Restoration rakes and libertines may have led to an increased interest in more "cruel" jokes at the expense of the unfortunate.⁶⁰ The "frolics" of the Earl of Rochester and his cronies included violent and humiliating treatment of disabled people—a form of wit satirized in Thomas Otway's play *Friendship in Fashion* (1678) in which the rake Malagene seeks to demonstrate that he is a man of "parts" by boasting of how in one of his "merry witty fits," he had taunted a lame beggar who asked him for assistance by tripping up "both his wooden Legs."⁶¹ However, even in the later seventeenth century only a small proportion of jest book material was concerned overtly with disability or deformity. Only fifteen of the 583 jests in William Hicks's *Oxford Jestes* (1671) concerned deformity, "crippled" or maimed bodies, sensory impairments, and speech defects.⁶² As such, the notion that disabled characters were "standing jokes" in early modern jest books needs careful qualification.⁶³

Nevertheless, for scholars seeking to uncover the meanings of disability in premodern society, jest books provide important material that provides insight into discourses of disability in Renaissance England. Jokes did not simply mock disabled characters; instead, the exaggerated, topsy-turvy world of the jest provided license for authors of jests to reflect on the nature of disability as stigma (via anxieties about pollution of the species), the relationship between qualities of the mind and the "defects" of the body, social concerns about the dangers of the disabled poor, and the gendered identity of disabled people, especially men. While a short essay such as this is unable to do justice to the full variety of these jests, several important themes emerge. There can be no doubt that there was a strong element of exploitation in early modern jest books in which the deformed body might provide an opportunity for the nondisabled to triumph over the "otherness" of impaired individuals. Disabled characters in jest books had the veracity of their afflictions challenged or mocked, were subjected to violence whether threatened or actually inflicted, or provided vehicles for the nondisabled to prove their verbal dexterity via ingenious word play and extended metaphors

that highlighted their nonhuman attributes or appearances, subjecting them to what Tom Shakespeare describes as a “normalizing verbal barrage.”⁶⁴ Material from jest books provides reinforcement for Row-Heyveld’s argument that representations of disability were becoming increasingly negative in England after the Reformation, as changes in religious practice and social welfare combined to devalue disabled persons, intensifying fears of imposture and criminality while simultaneously representing disabled men in particular as “impotent” and effeminized.

However, paying closer attention to the structure of this material allows us to shed light on the multiple meanings of impairment in this period. Although “deformed” bodies might be described in grotesque terms, jests did not merely view disability through the lens of the monstrous or the exotic. References to impairment being a punishment from God, or of outward deformity being a reflection of inner moral failings—made popular by Shakespeare’s portrayal of Richard III or ballads concerning “monstrous” births—were not often made explicit in this material. Authors of this material were more concerned, like others of the time, with the question of whether impairment was real or faked, rather than its spiritual dimensions. Moreover, whereas jests provided an outlet for exploring anxieties raised by encounters with the disabled poor on the streets of the early modern city, disabled characters were sometimes given the opportunity to fight back and turn the tables on those who sought to denigrate them. Disabled characters were not only victims but also trickster figures who challenged the status quo, and the unruliness of the disabled body might provide a powerful tool for satirizing social conventions.⁶⁵ Disability humor, like the experience of disability itself, resists straightforward categorization.

Notes

1. P. M. Zall, *A Hundred Merry Tales and Other Jestbooks of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 112. On the paradoxical praise of deformity see Naomi Baker, “‘To make love to a Deformity’: Praising Ugliness in Early Modern England,” *Renaissance Studies* 22, no. 1 (2007): 86–109.

2. Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 51.

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