Medieval Disability Sourcebook

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Complaint (1419–21)

Thomas Hoccleve
Contributed by Will Rogers

Introduction

Thomas Hoccleve’s *Series* is a text that is difficult to define. It is a collection of poems, ranging from a complaint about Hoccleve’s mental illness, to a dialogue with a friend, and finally, a copy of *Lerne to Die* and translations from the *Gesta Romanorum*. The selections from the latter include *Jereslaus’ Wife*—an analogue of the Constance story, similar to *The Man of Law’s Tale* and *Gower’s Tale of Constance*—and the *Tale of Jonathas*, which echoes *The Squire’s Tale* and focuses on a son who squanders three magical gifts. These various works, discrete in nature, nevertheless form a larger, unified whole, as each text suggests something of Hoccleve’s life to which he often alludes. Indeed, often nakedly autobiographical, the *Series* nevertheless blurs the line between fact and fiction, as Hoccleve’s fictional moralizations are introduced by his own struggles with a mental illness, which, according to Hoccleve, have been all too real. In his beginning exposition of his illness and subsequent dialogue with a nameless “Friend,” Hoccleve makes clear the severity of his mental break and the resulting alienation from London society. The dialogue with the friend which follows makes clear that Hoccleve’s recovery is presumably not complete, and he needs help and encouragement—even prodding—to continue writing. The dialogue then turns to matters of patronage, and the Duke of Gloucester, before returning to harm and pain.

One of the focal points of this pain is the damage done to Hoccleve’s own reputation through rumor and gossip about his extended mental illness, and these rumors introduce that Hoccleve, like his former friends, has allowed rumor and reputation to harm those who don’t deserve it, namely, women. Indeed, as Hoccleve is aware and as the dialogue with the friend suggests, Hoccleve acknowledges that his writings have hurt women, by voicing false narratives like the ones he hears about his own recovery from mental illness. This writing, centered on women, becomes a reflection of the gossip, which centers on him, and spreads the story of his mental breakdown. Then by taking his own alienation into account, Hoccleve seems to internalize his own malady as reason to repent and make amends. Indeed, this malady or sickness is inseparable from the work’s larger focus on the instability of the world, and the need to act moral and with virtue in spite of inhospitable circumstances, themes which the tales from the *Gesta Romanorum* and *Lerne to Die* make manifest. In a world where mental stability and health is no more secure than the seasons which change regularly, it is important to live as though each day is one’s last.

But we should keep in mind that Hoccleve’s poem gestures to a complex view of impairment and disability in fifteenth-century England. The difference between impairments and disability is a topic handled well by the *Series*. Impairment might simply signal some kind of bodily or mental difference from an imagined norm, as his own self-reported illness certainly does (at least in his telling). But his dialogue with his friend and complaint about the instability of social ties and friendship highlight that disabilities are often those impairments which elicit a social
response or hinder some kind of communal relationship. Like a modern disability, Hoccleve’s mental illness affects his employment and the quality of his life. Part of Hoccleve’s *Complaint* is that, long after his illness has ended, gossip about the illness remains, and this cloud of suspicion makes recovery practically impossible. The expectation, Hoccleve tells us, is that he would relapse, due to his age and health. Here is a place we might see how impairment becomes disability, as the mental illness affects Hoccleve’s employment and his status in London. His dialogue with his friend makes clear just how an impairment—according to Hoccleve, a mental breakdown caused by a variety of factors—might become disability once it affects one’s social status or access to employment. Indeed, the opening *Complaint*—printed in full here—voices the fears Hoccleve’s contemporaries have for his possible relapse. But the poems actually suggest that the disability is not the issue, but the quality of relationships and brokenness of the world, which make any deviation from the temporary fiction of the able body and mind fatal to one’s standing in the personal and professional world of fifteenth-century London. According to Hoccleve, the fiction of the able body is a temporary one. Given enough time or age, one will encounter deviations from a bodily or mental norm (however fictional that norm may be). So, Hoccleve’s words—that nothing stops change and can protect one from illness—reflect something similar: wealth, youth, all fail in the face of outside circumstances.

Finally, Hoccleve’s *Series* is a wonderful example of the developing role of medical figures and late medieval attempts to reconcile science and medicine with religion, as Hoccleve ends the *Complaint* with a revaluation of corporeal trials become a way to rid oneself of spiritual malady tying the brokenness of Hoccleve’s mind and body to the healing of his spirit, a connection suggested by the image of Christ as surgeon. The *Complaint*, therefore, in particular, offers a rich vocabulary for the medicalization of impairments, speaking of Hoccleve’s *disceas, maladye*, or *wyld infirmitie*. Healing, of course, comes, but through less than scientific or strictly medical means. Hoccleve finds a book with a dialogue featuring an allegorical Reason and internalizes the words as medicine. The *Complaint* ends, and the *Dialogue* begins, appropriately with Hoccleve viewing Christ as the physician, a connection made in other works of the period, as the growing power of medical figures became a symbol of God’s grace.

**Bibliography**

Doob, Penelope B.R. *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*. Yale University Press, 1974.


After that hervest Inned° has his sheves," And that the broune season of Myhelmessè was come, and gan the trees robbe of ther leves, That grene had bene and in lusty freshness and them in-to colowre of yelownesse had dyen and doune throwne under foote, that chaunce sank into myne herte roote." For freshely browght it to my remembraunce," that stablenes" in this world there is none.

There is no thinge but chaunge and variaunce: how welthye a man be or well be-gone, endure it shall not he shall it for-gon," deathe under fote shall hym thrist adowne:" that is every wites" conclusyon. Whiche for to weyve is in no mannes myght, how riche he be stronge, lusty, freshe, and gay, and in the end of Novembar, upon a nyght, syghenge° sore as I in my bed lay, for this and othar thoughtes whiche many a day before I toke sleape cam none in myne eye, so vexyd me the thougthfull maladye." I see well, sythen I with sycknes last was scourged, clowdy° hath bene the favoure that shone me. Full bright in tymes past, the sonne abatid, and the derke showre hildyd° downe right on me, and in langour he made swyme so that my wite to lyve no lust hadd, ne deleye. The grefe abowte my herte so swal° and bolned° evar to and to so sore, that nedes oute I must there with all. I thought I nolde° it kepe cloos no more, ne lett it in me, for to olde and hore," and for to preve I cam of a woman, I brast° oute on the morowe and thus began. Allmyghty god, as lyketh his goodnes, visyrethe folks alday, as men may se, with lose of good and bodily sikenese, and among othar, he forgat nat me. Witnes uppon the wyld infirmytie," which that I had, as many a man well knewe, and whiche me owt of my selfe cast and threw. It was so knowne to the people and kouthe° that cownsell was it none ne none be myght;° how it with me stode was in every mans mowthe, and that full sore my fryndes affright. They for myne helthe pilgrimages hight and sowght them, some on hors and some on foote, God yelde it them—to get me bote." But althowghe the substaunce of my memory went to pley, as for a certayne space,
yet the lord of vertew,° the kynge of glory,
of his highe myght and benyng grace,
made it to returne in-to the place
whence it cam, whiche at all hallwe messe,°
was five yeere neyther more ne lesse.
And evere sythen—thanked be God our Lord,
of his good reconciliacion—
my wyt and I have been of suche ac-
corde
as we were or the alteracion°
of it was, but by my savacion,
that tyme have I be sore sett on fire
and lyved in great torment and martire.°
For thoughg that my wit were home
came agayne,
men wolde it not so understond or take
with me to deale, hadden they dys-
dayne.
A ryotows° person I was and forsake,
min olde frindshipe was ovarshake,°
no wyte° withe me lyst° make daliance,
the worlde me made a straunge con-
tinuance," whiche that myne herte sore gan tor-
ment.
For ofte whan I, in Westmynster Hall,
and eke in London, among the prese°
gent,
I se the chere abaten and apalle°
of them that weren wonte me for to
calle
to companye; her° heed they caste
a-wry,
when I them mette as they not me sye.
As seide is in the sauter° might I say,
they that me sye fledden awey fro me,
for ofte whan I, in Westmynster Hall,
and eke in London, among the prese°
gent,
I se the chere abaten and apalle°
of them that weren wonte me for to
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to companye; her° heed they caste
a-wry,
when I them mette as they not me sye.
As seide is in the sauter° might I say,
they that me sye fledden awey fro me,
for ofte whan I, in Westmynster Hall,
and eke in London, among the prese°
gent,
I se the chere abaten and apalle°
of them that weren wonte me for to
calle
to companye; her° heed they caste
a-wry,
when I them mette as they not me sye.
As seide is in the sauter° might I say,
they that me sye fledden awey fro me,
for ofte whan I, in Westmynster Hall,
and eke in London, among the prese°
gent,
I se the chere abaten and apalle°
of them that were...
Thoughe man be well this day, no sykernesse
to hym bikhight\(^*\) is that it shall endure:
God hurte now can and nowe hele and cure.
He suffrith longe at the laste he smit;
whane that a man is in prosperite,
To drede a fall comynge it is a wit.
Who so that taketh the hede ofte may se
This worldis change and mutabilite\(^*\)
in sondry wyse, howe nedeth not expresse:
To my mater streight wole I me dresse
Men seyden I loked as a wilde steer,
and so my loke abowt I gan to throwe;
myne heed to hie\(^*\) another side I beer,\(^*\)
ful bukkyshe\(^*\) is his brayne, well may I trewe,
and seyde the thirde and apt is in the rowe
to site of them that a resounles\(^*\) reed\(^*\)
Can geve no sadnesse is in his heed.
Chaungid had I my pas some seiden eke,
for here and there forthe stirte I as a Roo\(^*\)—
none abode, none arrest, but all brain-seke.
Another spake and of me seide also,
my feete weren aye wavynge to and fro
whane that I stonde shulde and withe men talke
and that myne eyne sowghten every halke.\(^*\)
I leide an ere aye to as I by wente,
and herde all, and thus in myne herte I cast:
of longe abdyngne here I may repent;
leste, of hastinesse I at the last answere amyse best is hens\(^*\) hye fast.
For yf I in this preace amyssse me gye,
to harme will it me turne and to folly.
And this I demyd well and knew well eke,"
whatsoever I shuld answere or sey,
they wood not have holde it worth a leke.\(^*\)
For why, as I hadd lost my tonges key,
kept me cloes, and trussyd\(^*\) me my wey,
drowpynyge\(^*\) and hevye\(^*\) and all woo
bystad:
small cause had I, me thought, to be glade.
My spirits laboryd bysyly
to peinte countinaunce chere and loke,
for that men spake of me so wonderingly,
and for the very shame and fere I qwoke,\(^*\)
thoughe myne herte had been dypped
in the broke.
It wete and moyste I now was of my swot,\(^*\)
whiche was nowe frostye colde and now fiery hoot.
And in my chamber at home when I was
my selfe alone, I in this wyse wrowght.\(^*\)
I streit unto my myrrowr\(^*\) and my glas,
to loke how that me of my chere thowght
yf any were it than it owght,
for fayne wolde I, yf it had not be right,
amendyd it to my kunynge\(^*\) and myght.\(^*\)
Many a sawte\(^*\) made I to this myrrowre,
thinkynge, ‘Yf that I loke in this manere
amonge folke as I now do, none errowr of suspecte loke may in my face appere,
this continuance, I am surem and this chere,
If I forthe use is no thinge reprevable to them that have conseytes\(^n\) resonable.'

And therewithall I thought thus anon:

‘Men in theyr owne case bene blynd alday,
as I haue hard say many a day agone,
and in that plyght\(^n\) I stonde may.
How shall I doo, which is the best way,
my trowbled spirit, for to bringe ar rest?
Yf I wist howe, fayne\(^o\) wolde I do the best.'

Sythen I recoveryd was have I full ofte cawse had of angre and ympacience,\(^o\)
where I borne have it esely and softe,
sufferynge wronge be done to me, and offence,

and nowght answeryd ageyn, but kept sylence,
lest that men of me deme would, and seyne,
‘Se how this man is fallen in agayne!' As that I ones\(^o\) fro Westmynster cam,
vexiv full grevously withethe thoughtfull here,
thus thought I: ‘a great fole I am, this pavyment a dayes thus to bete,
and in and out, labour fast and swete,
whiche and hevynees to purchace, sythen I stand out of all favor and grace.'

And then thought I on that othar syde:
‘If that I not be sene amonge the prees,\(^o\)
men deme wele that I myne heade hyde,
and am worse than I am—it is no lees.'
O lorde, so my spirite was restles,
I soughreste and I not it found,
but aye was trouble, redy at myn hond.
I may not lett a man to ymagine ferre above the mone\(^o\) yf that hym lyst:
thereby the sowthe he may not deter-

But by the prefe\(^o\) bene things knowne and wiste,
many a dome\(^o\) is wrappyd in the myst;
man by his dedes, and not by his lokes,
shall knowne be, as it is writen in bokes.
By taste of frewte,\(^o\) men may well wete and knowe what that it is—othar prefe is there none;
every man wott wel that, as that I trowe,
right so they that demen my witt is gone,
as yet this day there demythe many a one
I am not well: may, as I by them goo,
taste and assay yf it be so or noo.

Upon a looke is harde, men them to grownde what a man is, thereby the sothe is hid;
whither his wittes seke bene or sounde, by cowntynaunce it is not wist ne kyd.\(^o\)
Thowghe a man harde have ones bene bityde,
God shilde\(^o\) it shuld on hym contynue alway:
by comunynge is the best assay.
I mean to comon of things mene,
for I am but right lewde dowtles\(^n\) and ygnoraunte, my cunnynge is full lenne,
yet homly reason know I nevartheles;
not hope I founden be so resonles as men demen—Marie, Christ forbede!
I can no more preve may the dede.
If a man ones fall in dronkenesse, shall he contynuee therein evar mo?
Nay, thowghe a man doo in drinkynge excesse
so ferforthe\(^o\) that not speake he ne can, ne goo,
and his wittes welny\(^o\) ben reftre\(^o\) hym froo,
and buried in the Cuppe,° he aftarward
comythe to hym selfe agayne, ellis were
it hard.
Right so, thowghe my witt were a
pilgrime,
and went fer fro home, he cam agayne.
God me voydyd° of this greevous venyme
that had enfectyd and wildyd° my
brayne.
Se how the curtese leche° most sov-
ereyne,
unot the sycke, gevithye medisyne
in nede and hym relevythe of his peyne.
Now let this passe, God wott, many a
man
semythe full wyse by cowntenaunce and
chere,
whiche, and he tastyd were what he can,
men myghten lichen hym to a fooles
pere.
And some man lokerthe in folryshe°
maner,
as to the outward dome and judgemen,
that as the prese descrete is and pru-
dent.
But algates,° howe so be my coun-
tynaunce,
debate is now none bytwyxt and my
wit,
allthowghte there were a dysseveraunce,"
as for a tyme, betwyxt me and it.
The greatar harme is myne, that never
yet
was I well lettered, prudent and dis-
crete;
there nevar stode yet wyse man on my
fete.
The sothe is this: suche conceit as I had,
and undarstondynge, all were it but
small,
byfore that my wyttes wearen unsad—
thanked be Owr Lord Ihesu Crist of
all!—
suche have I now, but blowe is ny ovr
all°
the reverse, where thorwghe is the
mornynge
whiche cawsethe me thus syghe in com-
playnynge.
Sythen my good fortune hathe changed
his chere,
hye time is me to crepe into my grace,
to lyve loyles," what do I here?
I, in my herte, can no gladnes have;
I may but small sey, but yf men deme I
rave,
sythen othar thinge the woo may I none
grype.
unto my sepultre" ame I nowe ripe.
My well, adwe farwell, my good for-
tune!
Out of yowr tables, me playned have ye;
sythen well ny eny wight for to comune
with me lothe is, farwell prosperitie!
I am no lengar of your lyverye!°
Ye have me put out of yowr remem-
braunce;
adewe° my good adventure and good
chaunce!
And as swise after thus bythowght I
me:
yf that I in this wyse me despeyre,
it is purchase of more advarsytye.
What nederthe it, my feble wit appeire;
sythe god hathe made myne helthe
home repayre°
blessed be he, and what men deme or
speke
suffre it—thinke I and me not on me
wreke.°
But some dele had I reioysynge°
amonge,
and gladnese also in my spirite,
that though the people took them mis and wronge
me demyng of my sycknesse not quite,
yet for they complayed the hevy plite
that they had sene me in with tender-
nesse
of hertes cherte, my grefe was the lesse.
In them put I no defawlte but one:
that I was hole," they not ne deme
kowld,
and day and day, they se me by them
gon
in heate and colde, and neythar still nor
lowde,
knew they me do suspectly a dirke
clowde
theyr syght obscuryd within and with-
out,
and for all that were they in suche a
dowt.
Axd have they full ofte sythe, and
freined
of my fellows of the prive seale°
and preyed them to tell them with hert
unfeynyd,
how it stode wyth me, whither yll or
well.
And they the sothe told them every
dell,
but they helden ther words not but les:
they myghten as well have holden ther
pes.
This troublly lyfe hathe all to longe
enduryd,
not have I wyst how in my skynne to
turne.
But now my selfe to my selfe have
ensured,
for no suche wyndrynge aftar this to
morne:
as longe as my lyfe shall in me soiorne,°
of suche ymaginynge, I not ne reche.°

Lat them drem as them lyst and speke
and dreche."°
This othar day, a lamentacion
of a wofull man in a bok I sye,
to whome words of consolation
Reason gave, spekynge effectually,
and well easyd my herte was therby.
For when I had a while, in the bok red,
with the speche of Reason was I well
fed.
This hevy man, wofull and angwyssh-
iows°
complained in this wyse and seyd he:
"my lyfe is unto me full encomberows,°
for whither or unto what place I flye,
my wyckednesses evar followe me,
as men may se the shadow of a body
swe,"°
and in no maner I may them eschwe.°
Vexation of spirite and torment
lake I right none I have them plente.
Wondarly byttar is my taast and sent;°
wo be the tyme of my naryvyte,
unhappy man that evar shuld it be!
O deathe, they strooke, a salve is of
sweetnes
to them that lyven in suche wretchednes.

Gretar plesaunce were it to dye,
by many folde, than for to lyve soo.
Sorows so many in me multype,
that my lyfe is to me a very foo;
comfortyd may I not be of my woo;
of my distresse se none end I can,
no force how sone I stinte° to be a man.
Than spake Reason: ‘What menythe all
this fare?
‘Thowghe welthe be not frindly to the
yet,
out of thyn herte voyde wo and care!’°
‘By what skyll how, and by what rede
and wit,°
seyd this wofull man, ‘myght I done it?’°
'Wrastle,' qwode Reason, 'agayne hevynesses of the worlde, troubles, suffring and duresses. Behold how many a man suffereth the disease as great as thow and all a way greatar; and thowghe it them pinche, sharply and ses, yet, paciently, they it suffar and bere: thinke here on and the lesse it shall the dere, suche sufferaunce is of mans gylt
clensyne, and them inablethe to loye everlastinge. Woor, hevynes and tribulation comon are to men all and profitable. Thowghe grevows be manns temptacion, it slyethe man not. To them that ben sufferable, and to whom gods stroke is acceptable, purveyed loye is, for God woundyrthe tho that he ordeyned hathe to blysse to goo. Gold purgyd is, thou seyst, in the furneis, for the fyner and clenner it shall be; of thy disease, the weyght and the peis bere lyghtly, for God to preve the, scorgyd the hathe with sharp adversitie; not gruche and sey, “Why susteyn I this?” for yf thow do, thow the takest amis. But thus thow shuldeth thinke in thyn herre, and sey, “to the, Lord God, I have agylyte so sore: I moot for myn offensis smerte as I am worthy. O Lorde, I am split, but thow to me, thy mercy graunt wilt. I am full swre, thow maist it not denye: Lord, I me repent and I the mercy crye.’ Lenger I thought red haue in this boke bot so it shope that I ne myght nowght. He that it owght agayne it to hym toke, me of his haste unware, yet have I cawght some of the doctryne by Reason tawght to the man as above have I sayde. whereof I hold me full well apayde. For evar sythen set haue I the lesse by the peoples ymagination, talkynge this and that of my sycknesse, whiche came of gods visytacion. Myght I have been found in probation, not grutchynge but have take it in sof-fraunce, holsome and wyse had be my gov-ernaunce. Farwell my sorow—I caste it to the cok. With pacience, I hens forthe thinke unpike of suche thoughtfull dissease and woo, the lok, and let them out that have me made to sike. Hereafter Owr Lord God may, yf hym lyke, make all myne olde affection resorte, and in the hope of that woll I me com forte. Throgh the gods iust dome and his judgement, and for my best, now I take and deme, gave that Good Lorde me my punishement: in welthe I toke of Hym none hede or yeme, Hym for to please and Hym honoure and queme, and He me gave a bone on for to knaw,
me to correcte and of Hym to have awe.

He gave me wit and He toke it away
when that He se that I it mys dyspent,
and gave agayne when it was to His pay,
He grauntyd me my giltes to repent,
and hens forwarde to set myne entent,
unto His deitie, to do plesaunce,
and to amend my synfull governaunce.
Lawde and honore and thanke unto The
be,
Lord God, that salve art to all hevynes!
Thanke of my welthe and myne adver-
syte,
thanke of myne elde and of my seknese,
and thanke be to Thyne infinite
goodnese
for Thy gyftes and benefices all,
and unto They mercye and grace I call.
Endnotes

1 The text below is taken from *The Series*, ed. Frederick Furnivall, *Hoccleve’s Works: The Minor Poems* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, and Co., 1892). The Complaint appears in lines 1–413 of *The Series*. This text is in the public domain. Footnotes and endnotes have been provided by Will Rogers.