Medieval Disability Sourcebook

Cameron Hunt McNabb, Danielle Allor, Maura Bailey, Lucy Barnhouse, Autumn Battista, Paul A. Broyles

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Menstruation, Infirmary, and Religious Observance from *Ecclesiastical History*¹ (late 9th c.²)

Bede

Contributed by Heide Estes

Introduction

The monk of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria known as the Venerable Bede wrote, about 731 in Latin, an *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* providing an account of the migration of Angles and Saxons to what would become England and a narration of their conversion to Christianity. The *Ecclesiastical History* (hereafter *EH*) was translated into Old English in the late ninth century.

It is difficult enough within modern discourse to define “disability” within the context of illness and impairment, though it is clear it is defined by social constraints as much as by the nature or extent of illness or impairment: that is, whether or not a particular embodiment counts as disabling is constructed by social norms and is not something essential or inherent about the way a given body exists in the world. For the medieval period, distinguishing disabled bodies from others is even more complicated. Joshua Eyler and Julie Singer point out that contemporary social, medical, and cultural models of disability do not well account for the representations and framings of illness and impairment in medieval narratives, and this is certainly the case for the Old English *EH*, where the vocabularies of illness and impairment overlap so that the terminology is difficult to define specifically. In the first of the passages translated here, menstruation is described as either *untrymness*, defined by dictionaries of Old English as “weakness, sickness, illness, infirmity,” or *monaðaðle*, “a disease that occurs at intervals of a month.”³ Susan Wendell has argued that gender itself is constructed by modern societies as a disability, because of the ways that physical constructions of the world we live in assume an average-sized healthy man’s height and strength are available to everyone: lifting a suitcase into an overhead luggage rack on a train or plane, or opening a heavy door, may be problematic for small women, thus effectively disabling them by virtue of choices about how to construct human environments. Tory Vandeventer Pearman follows Wendell in investigating intersections of gender and disability in medieval literature and demonstrating that, particularly late in the medieval period, gender was considered by medical science and religious discourse alike to be disabling.

The Old English *EH* contains passages that identify illness or impairment as punishment for sin, as when St. Albans’ executioner is punished with blindness (I.7) or when St. Æthelthryth tells her companions that she suffers from a tumor because she wore a gold necklace in her youth (IV.21). A selection from a passage about women and religious observance asks, can pregnant women be baptized? How long should a woman wait after childbirth to go to church? (The answers: yes, and immediately.) The selection provided here contemplates whether menstruating women should enter church. The Old English *EH* states that hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and weariness are all kinds of human “untrymness” associated with original sin, similar to menstrual flow, so that menstruating women
are linked with non-gendered bodily conditions of hunger and weariness. The text states, “it is the custom of good minds and men, that they sometimes see sin, where there is none, and often something is done without sin that came of sin.” Menstruation, like hunger and fever, is the result of original sin but is not sinful in itself. Yet the text’s repetition that menstruation constitutes “untrymness” creates a special category of infirmity particular to women, beyond the more general states of hunger, etc. The characterization of menstruating women as “untrym” suggests that the way later medieval as well as modern societies structurally disable women is also operative in Bede’s account of menstruating women.

Bibliography

“Menstruation, Infirmitry, Religious Observance” (Book I, from Chapter 27, Question 8)

...If a woman is taken with the accustomed monthly disease [monaðaðle], should she be allowed to go into church or receive the sacrament of holy communion?...

Well, we know and learn from Christ’s books, that the woman who was suffering from the flow of blood came meekly to the Lord’s back and touched the hem of his garment, and immediately her infirmity [untrymnes] went away and she was made whole. Therefore if the woman in the time of flowing blood might laudably touch the Lord’s clothing, then why should she who suffers the bloody flow of monthly disease not be allowed to go into the Lord’s church? But now you say, she needed to touch Christ’s clothing because of her illness [untrymnes]; the women of whom we speak now are under the sway of repeated habit. But consider, dear brother, that all that we suffer in this mortal body is arranged by the authority of the Lord’s judgment on account of the suffering of our kind. It followed upon the sin of the first man, for hunger, thirst, heat, cold, weariness—all that is because of the sickness [untrymnes] of our kind. And what else can be sought [as a remedy] against hunger except food; against thirst, drink; against heat, coolness; against cold, clothing; against fatigue, rest; and against infirmity, to seek medicine? Now, for women, the monthly infirmity of flowing blood is sickness. Therefore now if that woman presumed appropriately to touch the Lord’s clothing in the period of illness, so that the sickness of one individual was forgiven, why then should all women not be forgiven, when they are made infirm by the fault of their own nature? Likewise, in those same days it shall not be forbidden to them to take the sacrament of the holy communion. Now, if out of great reverence some one does not presume to receive, he is to be praised; but if he takes it, he is not to be condemned. For it is the custom of good minds and men, that they sometimes see sin, where there is none, and often something is done without sin that came of sin, just as it is, when we are hungry, we eat without sin, and it came to pass out of the sin of the first man that we might be hungry. For as in the old law the outer works were observed, so in the new law, the external is not at all as highly esteemed as the inward thoughts are carefully observed. Though the law forbids eating many things as unclean, however in the Gospel the Lord says, not at all that which goes into the mouth of man is degrading, but that which comes out of the mouth, those are the things that defile the man. And now after that, that was explained, and he said, Evil thoughts go out of the heart. There, it is abundantly explained that deeds which are revealed by the almighty God to be unclean and defiled, are born from the origin\(^\text{origin}\) of polluted and unclean thoughts. About that likewise the Apostle Paul said, all is clean to those who are clean; to the polluted and the unbelievers nothing is clean. And immediately after the apostle explained the cause of this same pollution, and said, therefore they are polluted in both mind and in conscience. But if the meat is not clean for those whose mind is not clean, then why should the woman of clean mind who suffers by her nature be counted as unclean?

\(^\text{origin literally “rootstock”}\)
Endnotes

1 The Old English Version of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, ed. Thomas Miller, Early English Text Society O. S. 95, 96 (Trübner, 1890). Translated by Heide Estes.

2 This date represents the date of the Old English translation of the Latin text. The Latin manuscripts date to the eighth century.