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Less Valued Knights: Disability in Modern Fiction of the Middle Ages

Elizabeth Wawrzyniak
Gonzaga University, wawrzyniak@gonzaga.edu

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> *Know that there were three kinds of tables there. The first was the Round Table. King Arthur was companion and lord of this one. The second table was called the Table of the Errant Companions, those who went seeking adventure and waited to become companions of the Round Table. Those of the third table were those who never left court and did not go on quests or search of adventures, either because of illness or because they had not enough courage. These knights were called the less valued knights (Lacy 2010, 392-93)*.

This mention of multiple tables in Arthur's court in the *Post Vulgate Merlin Continuation* is unique, because while the term "errant companion" resonates strongly with the more familiar "knight errant," the phrase "less valued knights" never comes up again. Nor do the second and third tables appear in any other canonical Arthurian text, before or after the *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* cycles. This space—physical and textual, for those who are unable to pursue chivalric lifestyles due to the demands and limitations of their bodies—invites the kind of critical inquiry that the field of disability studies can and does provide. Indeed, the addition of such a table to Arthur's court suggests possible answers to the question of what happens to the casualties of war in Arthur's kingdom, of the fates of those who have been disabled by illness or injury, of the status of the infirm, the elderly, and the impaired. There is a place for them in Arthur's court, these knights who cannot or can no longer serve as those better-known ones of the Round Table—a place on the margins, yes, but still a part of the Arthurian chivalric community at large. But while the notion is never explored further within the canon, it is taken up in modern Arthurian fiction, where two postmodern historical novels explore the possibilities that a "Table of Less Valued Knights" presents for the conceptualization of non-normative bodies in a culture so dependent upon the performance of physical prowess as a form of social currency.[1]

In the first of these, Liam Perrin's *Sir Thomas the Hesitant and the Table of Less Valued Knights*, a young serf travels to Camelot for King Arthur's wedding to ask Arthur for assistance. Instead, he finds himself knighted and assigned to the Table of Less Valued Knights, which is "far and away the unloftiest" of the knights tables at Camelot (Perrin 2013, 38). What's interesting about this text is that from the start bodily difference and difference in ability is celebrated—even by the comically inept King Arthur--while at the same time Mitchell and Snyder's trope of "narrative prosthesis" is called out and critiqued. The humor of the story—what Louise D'Arcens would term the "comic medievalism" of the text—highlights the subversive potential of the narrative, the critical subtext that "distances audiences by inviting them to observe the Middle Ages from the safe vantage point of modernity," foregrounded in a sort of Bakhtinian Carnivalesque-style of humor (Bradford 2015, 156). There is a topsy-turvy quality to the text, a reversal of focalization—for this is Arthur's court experienced through the perspective of someone of quite low birth, unlike most medieval literature—and the recentralization of the narrative from the worthiest and best known knights—Lancelot, Gawain, etc.—to those at the margins.

[1] A possible reason for this may be the unavailability of this text in English except for Norris J. Lacy's 1996 clothbound translation in five volumes (which is quite expensive, as you might imagine) and the recently released (2010) new edition, which has been published as a 10-volume paperback collection, which can be purchased in single volumes or in its entirety, making it more accessible to both scholars and general readers.

Thomas is assigned to the Less Valued Knights because of his inexperience and his want of martial skill—unlike several of the men and boys waiting to become knights, Thomas was born into the lower class, and lacks the privilege of wealth, the life-long training for a position of power that sons of wealthier families receive. And unlike other members of this group, which includes "Dedric the Diplopian," "Ox the Monosyllabic," and Thomas's friend, "Phillip the *Exceptionally* Disadvantaged," Thomas has neither an exceptional quality nor a fault—except, perhaps, his inability to make a decision (he is always unsure of what to do next) thus earning him his less-than impressive sobriquet (67, 73, 111). Hereafter, he is Sir Thomas the Hesitant. His companions have an easier time of it, however. For example, when Dedric announces to Arthur at the knighting ceremony—where knights are assigned their epithet—that he has double-vision, the response of the king is enthusiastic. "What a wonderful gift," he says, with "reverence in [his] voice" (63). Arthur doesn't understand that double vision does not mean that Dedric sees a *literal* double of everything, but still, celebrates the knight's difference. "Who is braver," the king addresses the court, "the man who faces an enemy, or the man who faces two? And what if he knew one of his opponents was a phantom, but knew not which? Even braver, I say!" (64).

What Perrin highlights in his text—Thomas's time in Camelot and his quest to achieve justice for his lands and family—is the way exceptionality is constructed in modern and medieval texts as something that can be utilized. Literally, disability, impairment, and difference are often the crutch upon which a narrative relies, and medieval Arthurian literature is no different. As Karen Cherewatuk explores in her 2014 article on the wounds in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the wounds of knights like Percivale, Gareth, and Lancelot all offer cautionary warnings—in these cases, against the dangers of illicit sex—and act as symbols of larger issues within the realm (Cherewatuk 2014). In *Sir Thomas*, metaphor gives way to literal interpretation: "The Knights of [the] Less Valued Table [are] the workhorses of the court, performing the inglorious duties that are nevertheless essential to a realm's operation and taking care of any requests that the other orders found... uninteresting" (38). In fact, in the pamphlet given to Thomas and the others, *The Code* by which their Table serves the king, there is a paragraph under "*Duties and Responsibilities*" which explicitly states that: "Whenever, and being in all places and circumstances, it is the duty of the foresworn Less Valued to make his betters look better even be it a tarnish to himself and his own reputation. In all things, the character and manner of appearance of the higher Orders must be preserved" (113).

In the end, of course, Thomas and his companions put an end to the threat against his farm and family. And it is the knights' acceptance of their differences—beyond that, the self-actualization of the benefits of their difference—that saves the day. Nowhere is this more apparent than with Thomas's magic sword. Given to him by the healer Pyralis, the sword's magical power is its stench. But while Pyralis had not set out to make a sword that fought its enemies by releasing an incredible stench, and though it isn't what he expected to create, the healer does recognize its potentiality as a weapon. Thomas, as well, eventually learns to recognizes its value, and causes the sword to reflect on itself and its abilities:

> "The difference between a blessing and a curse is whether or not a person decides to want the thing. The sword [...] had imagined itself a curse its entire short life. Even the healer who'd created and admired it had thought of its quality in terms like terrible, foul, and monstrous. It didn't help that he also made excuses for its construction—calling it a prototype and suspecting it of kinks. Thomas's initial reaction had reinforced its early opinion of itself. But then things began to change" (60).

The change starts with Philip, one of Thomas's friends, who "accepted the sword immediately for who it was, kinks and all. [...] But the kicker came when Thomas declared [it] rather... remarkable […] putting

the sword's destiny in its own control" (60-61). A similar situation occurs with the giantess Gorgella, who has a habit of destructing things, a skill which gets put to use when she reconceptualizes her difference as something with the potential to be constructive: "Not demolition" but "rapid spontaneous deconstruction [...] There's lots of training and skill involved in knowing just where and how to knock something down safely" she tells the group (225). Difference is actively celebrated within the text, disadvantage is minimized and, turned into advantage, into the source of innovation and diversity, something that is desperately needed in Arthur's kingdom (Wendell 2006, 246).

A similar theme is taken up in Marie Phillips' *The Table of Less Valued Knights*. In this text, the protagonist an elderly knight who has been demoted to the Table of Less Valued Knights. As with *Sir Thomas*, the way that institutional structures of power act as disabling agents or oppressive forces is highlighted from the very start. In the Great Hall, the knights "were arranged in what, in a less outspokenly egalitarian court, one might have called a hierarchy, with the best and most famous sitting nearest their king" (Phillips 2014, 3). The Less Valued Knights, in contrast—"the elderly, the infirm, the cowardly, the incompetent and the disgraced"—sit in the back at a rectangular table, and are "Camelot's dirty little secret," consisting of "the knights spotless King Arthur would rather you didn't know about" (4, 29).

The disabling qualities in this book include old age, mixed-race identities, gender, physical difference, as well as gay and transgender identities. These, of course, are not all considered disabilities according to modern disability theories or notions of disability. However, each of these states or identities can be *disabling*. A knight past his time is sent away from the table of the best of his peers, relegated to the margins despite his service. A half-giant is an outcast in both his communities, strikingly large among humans yet "a bit small" in comparison to his fellow giants (23). Queen Martha, who becomes Marcus because as a woman she is not allowed the power to rule herself, much less an entire kingdom. (Her narrative consists of the frequent fear of being found out—is her voice too high, is her beard thick enough, can she interact with the men on their level?) Then there is Jemima, the elephant who is considered a "monster," a "deformed horse," and object of fascination "by people who wanted to see [her] for themselves, or who had heard that touching her thick grey hide would cure any ailment," which resonates powerfully with the way impaired individuals in public often find themselves the subject of unwelcome attention from strangers (21-22, 53). A knight born as William prefers "to be called Gwendoline" and is locked up in an iron mask for years because his gender identity does not align with his sex or the culture's expectations of gender expression (253). And then there is Jasper, heir to a small kingdom, who fakes his own death after his father dismisses him as "debauched, disgusting and evil," and threatens to burn him "at the stake for [his] crimes against nature" (279). In other words, for being gay.

But Phillips does not just highlight the disabling effects of difference; she, too, calls out the way that disability is all too frequently used as a prosthesis for narrative as well. The sword given to Queen Martha, who has been transformed into a man by the Lady of the Lake, turns out to be a woman—Leila—also transformed by magic. ("You have to be careful how you phrase things with the Lake people," she warns.) And when the giant asks what being a sword is like, she tells him that: "It's worse than you can possibly imagine," said Leila. "You're completely trapped, and almost completely powerless unless you're in someone's hand. And I can't describe the frustration of understanding everything that goes on and being paralysed in this form, unable to act, unable to communicate" (283). Leila believed her love for a prince was spurned because "of [her] lowly status or the colour of [her] skin," and it is anger and jealousy that drive her to ask the Lady of the Lake for a favor (282). As a result, she is turned into a sword, and retains only limited self-determination over herself. Instead, she is under the control of external forces--the curse put upon her by the Lady in the Lake that leads her to attack Sir Humphrey, for example, because he will be able to help her complete her quest; or by

Martha/Marcus, who attempts to wield her as a weapon. Leila not only seems to set the whole story in motion when she betrays the man she loves, she is also the means by which the story is resolved, leading Humphrey and Martha/Marcus to the objects of their quests.

In the end, both stories resolve with the parties finding solutions for the problems that have overtaken their lands. But, while they may in some ways be symbolic of the state of their lands and people—and I am not convinced that they are in these texts—they are themselves the individuals who seek out and achieve solutions. Their differences and their disabilities are vital elements of their quest, and not in a representational way but one that is tangible, material. And the facets of their character that mark them as different are treated as positive features, as normative. For, as Sir Humphrey says to Martha in *Less Valued Knights*, "The point […] is that Lancelot may be the best knight in the world—truly, he actually may be—but he is far from perfect. Nobody's perfect. Well, Galahad might be pretty much perfect, but you just want to smack him in his smug chops, so that makes him not perfect" (154). Narratives of disability are about excellence, suggest Mitchell and Snyder; a disability "calls stories into being" through the desire to explain where and how deviations from the "accepted norm" have arisen (Mitchell and Snyder 2006, 208). But in *Sir Thomas* and in *The Less Valued Knights*, each of the characters is in some way considered an "excellence" or "extraordinary." (Isn't that what an epithet is for, after all?) As the quote above suggests, difference is something everyone shares, difference is the norm, not perfection.

Of course, these representations of disability and difference are not without room for criticism. First, the fact that while difference and disability seems to be at the forefront of these texts, actual characters that might be considered "disabled" by according to the modern medical model that pervades our understanding of the term really only inhabit secondary spaces. And both authors use representations of disability in order to explore a social and cultural message; even if that message is the desire to expose the very way that difference is often used as narrative prosthesis, it seems disability as prosthesis remains unavoidable here. But what a text like Perrin's *Sir Thomas the Hesitant* and Phillips' *The Table of Less Valued Knights* can offer readers and disability studies is a window into how medieval literature incorporates notions of difference and impairment into its narrative. How modern literature has inherited the dual legacy of disability as it was represented in the literature of the Middle Ages and what medievalized beliefs modernity holds about the status of the disabled individual in medieval culture.

Through the humorous reversal of several familiar themes, motifs, or tropes of Arthurian literature, Perrin and Phillips do expose the often unacknowledged ways in which disability and the disabled are used as metaphors, symbols, or signifiers without representing "disability as an experience of social or political dimensions" (Mitchell and Snyder 2006, 205). In fact, that both novels take up disability, or impairment, or difference, in a political dimension is undeniable—they each move outward from the center of government, King Arthur's court, toward the extreme margins of both their society and culture. In the end, what both of these texts do is help the reader to conceptualize disability and impairment beyond simply a medical model and bodily wholeness; poverty, age, sexuality, these are all things that can be considered disabling from the perspective of cultural disability studies, and moreover, specifically within the context of the general Middle Ages. The concept of a Table of Less Valued Knights allows us space to wonder about all the knights who are not seated at the celebrated Round Table, all the stories that might exist in the story's gaps. And Perrin and Phillips, in taking up the phrase, the question, provide us with possible answers and the drive to inquire further.

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