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Containing the Blemmye: Anxiety Towards Congenital Difference in the Old English Wonders of the East

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CONTAINING THE BLEMMYE: ANXIETY TOWARDS CONGENITAL
DIFFERENCE IN THE OLD ENGLISH *WONDERS OF THE EAST*

by

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A Thesis

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the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Approved by:

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Dr. Christopher Foley

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to illuminate early medieval anxieties about sex, procreation, and congenital physical difference by applying a lens of critical disability theory to the Old English *Wonders of the East*, primarily as it survives in the eleventh-century manuscript, London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius B.v. This thesis focuses on the textual and illustrative representation of one Wonder, the Blemmye—an approximately eight-foot-tall, eight-foot-wide androgynous humanoid, whose eyes and mouth are in their chest and who does not possess a head—as a historic embodiment of what disability meant in relation to the early medieval English worldview. This thesis considers the Blemmye with respect to cultural theories of disability, as well as ideas of monstrosity, abjection, and the visual gaze, to expose certain cultural attitudes, particularly that of the early medieval English, towards disability.

This thesis demonstrates that when viewing medieval texts such as *Wonders of the East* through a lens for disability, the desire to classify and master extraordinary bodies exposes itself as part of the early medieval English consciousness. Their illustrative construction of the Blemmye body obscures the presence of genitalia, despite the text presenting the Blemmye as a sexually procreative being. While the text raises ideas of procreation, the illustrations suggest an unwillingness on behalf of the early medieval English to recognize the sexual and procreative capacities of the Blemmyes. Consequently, this project sheds light on the anxieties toward congenital physical difference evident in the textual and illustrative treatment of the Blemmye in *Wonders of the East*.

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I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Alexandra Valint and Dr. Christopher Foley, both of whom provided invaluable insight into bettering the project. As a Victorianist, Dr. Valint reminded me to remember and accommodate my non-medieval audiences. As a stickler for historical context, Dr. Foley reminded me to engage with more than just the passages of my primary sources. I look forward to shaping this project even further in the future, with all of their suggestions in mind.

Additionally, my close friend Hannah Wielgosz, as well as my immediate family, have always encouraged me throughout every step of the process. Each of them reminded me how capable I was when I most needed it. My partner and colleague, Jordan James, did this and more; he was my occasional research assistant. Lastly, I want to thank the

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my colleagues: Marisa Mills, Bryana Fern, Heather Miller, Autumn Pearson, and Crystal Giles. Our Facebook group chat has been a source of sanity and humor for me. It has been a space for me to ask endless questions (sorry) and vent about anything (thanks for listening). Each of them inspires me for different reasons, but, without a doubt, they are all impressive scholars. I am grateful to have met them during my time at the University of Southern Mississippi, and even more privileged to call such a motivating group of women my friends. I could not have asked for a better quarantine support group, and I will be enthusiastically watching and cheering as they move forward in what will be their exciting careers.

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CHAPTER I - CONTAINING THE BLEMME: ANXIETY TOWARDS
CONGENITAL DIFFERENCE

IN THE OLD ENGLISH *WONDERS OF THE EAST*

Introduction

In the third episode of HBO's drama *The New Pope*, aired on January 27, 2020, a single mother drowning in financial burden is offered a large sum of money in exchange for having sex with a facially disfigured man. She hesitantly agrees and audiences are confronted with an angelic, picturesque woman walking into a shadowy room, where a nameless masculine body sits, eager on the edge of the bed. He salivates, moans, and reaches a claw-like hand out to touch the perfect body presented before him. However, witnessing his disfigurement, the woman recoils immediately from his touch and flees the room, leaving the grotesque body to howl and wail in perfect monstrous debasement.¹

This young man is depicted as a creature of shame and no sexual appeal, tucked away in isolation to masturbate while he “stares at naked women all day.”² When considering this scene through a lens of critical disability studies, the interaction serves as yet another example in a long-standing practice of imaginative works denying non-“normate” bodies consensual sexual interactions and by extension, the opportunity to procreate.³ Additionally, the representation of persons with disability as monstrous,

¹ Based on what viewers see of his body in this particular scene, the anonymous man seems to be experiencing hypertrichosis (also referred to as Werewolf Syndrome): the entirety of his face, arms, and hands are covered in excessive hair growth to the point that he appears more animal than human.

² Dir. Sorrentino, “Episode 3,” 00:45:20.

³ Figures such as the one in *The New Pope* are consistently rejected and/or written to have the need to force themselves on others for sexual gratification. Other historic literary examples of this imaginative tradition can be found in the titular characters of *Richard III* (1597), *Bluebeard* (1697), *Frankenstein*

grotesque, hypersexualized, unintelligible, and apart from humanity, in which this scene in *The New Pope* participates, continues a tradition in Western representations of disabled bodies with roots in the conceptualization of monstrosity in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. This thesis aims to illuminate early medieval anxieties about sex, procreation, and congenital physical differences that anticipate the underlying assumptions about disability as seen in *The New Pope* and other modern examples of disability. Through applying a lens of critical disability to the Old English *The Wonders of the East* and images of the Blemmye—an approximately eight-foot-tall, eight-foot-wide androgynous humanoid whose eyes and mouth are in their chest and does not possess a head—I argue that the Blemmye serves as a historic embodiment of what disability meant in relation to the early medieval English worldview.⁴ This thesis considers representations of disability not to validate or discredit conceptualizations of disability, but rather to expose certain cultural *attitudes*, particularly that of the early medieval English, towards disability.

The majority of scholarly conversations surrounding disability center on the modern era, crediting the rise of modernity and industrialization as the leading cause behind the goal for eighteenth-century science, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, “to classify and master [...] the extraordinary body,” especially those bodies seen as monstrous or Other.⁵ However, bodies categorized as disabled also often intermingle

(1818), *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), *Dracula* (1897), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1909), *The Man Without a Face* (1928), as well as the minor characters Argante in *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and Caliban in *The Tempest* (1623). While this is not an exhaustive list, it does expose a tendency in the literary canon to imagine disfigured characters as sexually unappealing and/or sexually deviant.

⁴ Because the medieval spellings differ, I am following Asa Simon Mittman’s lead to adopt the modern Anglicized version, “blemmye(s),” throughout.

⁵ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 57.

with theoretical perspectives of “monstrosity” and monstrous bodies. The way the Blemmye is presented in *Wonders of the East* resonates with both monstrosity and disability. The intent of this thesis is not to conflate monstrosity and disability, but to acknowledge that they intersect in meaningful ways.⁶ As this thesis demonstrates, the human impulse to “classify and master” these extraordinary bodies, to borrow Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s phrase, especially those with congenital somatic difference, has a much more nuanced and ancient history than has been recognized in current scholarship on disability.⁷ Because disability is considered a modern concept, disability theorists tend to gloss over the medieval era, offering few blanket statements about the entire period, while mythologizing modernity as a massive turning point in the ways bodies have been socially and culturally viewed.⁸

While this *is* undoubtedly true that modernity changes concepts of embodiment, the social urge to dominate and categorize physically different bodies was not born at the

⁶ It is crucial to recognize that monstrosity and disability *are* separate—especially in our current cultural moment wherein disability and disability activism is progressively becoming more apparent. Tory V. Pearman states: “In coupling disability and monstrosity, scholars must be careful to insist on the material, lived experiences of people with disabilities while also acknowledging the theoretical connotations suggested by monsters [...] Both fields must consider how we can make use of monstrosity and disability as a critical tool without compressing or silencing the experience of those with disabilities” (vii).

⁷ In terms of this project, congenital disability refers to disability formed prior to birth, or what Margarit Shildrick refers to as the “complex organization of the early embryo” (“The Self’s Clean and Proper Body,” 307). Additionally, she writes “Many fairly common congenital conditions are counted as deformities precisely because they breach the external margins of the body [...]” (307). In other words, congenital disability refers to disability developed in utero and commonly has an external, visible emphasis to it. In their joint study examining the stigma towards acquired vs. congenital disability, Kathleen R. Bogart, Nicole M. Rosa, and Michael L. Slepian state that congenital disability “cannot be acquired” and that “people with congenital disability are born into their conditions” (“Born That Way or Became That Way,” 597–98).

⁸ For example, Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*; Stiker, *A History of Disability*; Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*; Covey, *Social Perceptions of People with Disabilities in History*; and Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity” each briefly mention disability as being seen as divinely ordained in the medieval perspective. Beyond this, the scope of their work relies largely on examples of disability from the late 16th century and beyond.

modern scientist's dissection table nor in his cabinet of curiosities.⁹ Rather, when viewing early medieval texts such as *Wonders of the East* through the lens of disability, the desire to classify and master extraordinary bodies exposes itself as part of the early medieval English consciousness through their illustrative construction of the Blemmye body, as well as their refusal to acknowledge the Blemmye as a sexually procreative being. Consequently, this project sheds light on the anxieties toward congenital physical difference evident in the textual and illustrative treatment of the Blemmye in *Wonders of the East* as it survives in two compilation manuscripts: London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius B.v. and Cotton MS Vitellius A.xv.¹⁰ In the Vitellius manuscript, *Wonders of the East* appears once in Old English, whereas in the Tiberius manuscript, predominantly written in the eleventh century with some later twelfth-century additions, *Wonders of the East* appears in both Latin and Old English. Both manuscripts illustrate the *Wonders*, including the Blemmye (see figures 1 and 2).

⁹ The terms “modernity” and “modern” in the context of this thesis refer to the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries—that period of human history in which naturalism, scientific categorization, and surgical “correction” of non-normative bodies was on the rise. Some examples of this include: Adolphe Quetelet’s bell curve of normalcy, Isidore Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire’s *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l’organisation chez l’homme et les animaux*, Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory, among several others. See Davis *Enforcing Normalcy*, 23–49. This perspective of disability with respect to pathology is often referred to as the “medical model.” See Dan Goodley, *Disability Studies*, 6–8.

¹⁰ According to the British Library, Tiberius B.v was copied in the second quarter of the 11th century, possibly at Canterbury, by mostly one scribe, with some later additions. The codex contains multiple texts relating to astronomy, timekeeping, geography, as well as royal genealogies. Vitellius A.xv is a composite manuscript, dated approximately to the year 1000, which contains the Southwick Codex and the Nowell Codex. In the Nowell Codex, both *Wonders of the East* and the famous *Beowulf* are found. Like *Beowulf*, *The Wonders of the East* is deeply invested in heritage, monstrosity, and disability. See Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 58–85, as well as Bruce Wallace, “Grendel and Goliath.” It is important to acknowledge that the people commonly referred to as “Anglo-Saxons” consisted of several different ethnic groups in the northern European regions and not singularly Germanic descendants. Because of this, it not possible to confirm whether the scribe(s) creating the manuscripts were part of the Anglo-Saxon ethnonational group. However, they were certainly part of the larger early medieval English cultural sphere.

Wonders is a geographical catalogue-style tour of the East that features a broad range of non-normative bodies called “Wonders” or “Marvels.”¹¹ The text has no



Figure 1. *Tiberius Portrait of a Blemmye*

London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius B.v/1, f. 82r, c. 1025–50, courtesy of the British Library’s *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*. The Blemmye is depicted in pale ink with faint orange outlining the inner visible features. The Blemmye grasps the frame with both hands and both polydactyl feet. The Blemmye wears a straight expression while staring directly at viewers. The sex of the Blemmye is unclear, as a dark ink blot obscures the genitalia.

narrative, nor any sense of conventional plot; rather, the relation of the text comes from the perspective of a disembodied, roving eye (which I henceforth refer to as “the narrator” for the sake of clarity). This narrator simply reports what it sees, which typically “informs the reader, generally in imprecise terms, of the location, appearance, and habits of the [W]onders” in a few cursory sentences.¹²

These Wonders can have any of the following traits: extraordinary dimensions, cannibalistic diets, hermaphroditic features, extra or fewer limbs, a hybrid exterior, and several other possibilities that are not typically situated within the realm of expected human

¹¹ For the remainder of this project, I use the term “Wonders” to reference the groups/communities of persons in *Wonders of the East* as suggested by Asa Simon Mittman (“Are the ‘monstrous races’ races?”). Mittman interrogates and ultimately rejects the commonly used phrase “monstrous races,” arguing: “We might use modern translations of the most common medieval terms applied to these beings: ‘wonders’ or ‘marvels.’ [...] We should reject the term ‘race’ in this context because it would have either carried no meaning for their creators, depictees and original audiences, or would have meant something radically different from what modern readers associate with the term. We should also reject the term because ‘race’ is as artificial a notion as ‘the monster,’ and has a history perhaps yet more pernicious. And finally, we should reject the term because its retention reifies the implicit reality of the ‘white’ or ‘European’ or ‘Christian’ ‘race’ at the core of medieval discourse” (48).

¹² Mittman and Kim, “Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England,” 338.

possibility. Essentially, the only differences distinguishing Blemmye bodies from “ordinary” human bodies are their dimensions (eight feet by eight feet), as well as the spatial organization of their features with their eyes and mouth situated in their chest rather than a head (see Figure 1). Rather than being a categorically hybrid monster—i.e. a body with both animal and human characteristics—as most of the Wonders are, the Blemmyes are an unusual case of Wonders who only possess distinctly human features. The Homodubii, who are fifteen feet tall with two faces, the Sciopod, who have only one foot, and the Panoti, who have extremely large ears, are also variations on human forms, rather than “cobbled together from the parts of multiple known creatures.”¹³

Scholarship on *Wonders of the East* tends to focus on discussing this text as a source of understanding medieval views of monstrosity, race relations, and inspiration for gender and queer readings, rather than disability.¹⁴ However, Asa Simon Mittman offers a particularly relevant study of the Blemmye as “morally abject” and “the very definition of disgusting” in the early medieval English perspective.¹⁵ This thesis expands the implications of Mittman’s argument by examining the early medieval English illustrative treatment of the Blemmye with respect to the textual description of the Blemmye as a sexually procreative Wonder. I propose that by not including a clear marker or presence

¹³ Ibid., 339.

¹⁴ For a discussion of *Wonders of the East* as a medieval incarnation of monstrosity, see Mittman and Kim, “Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England.” For a critique of the term “monstrous races” with respect to *Wonders of the East*, see Mittman, “Are the ‘monstrous races’ races?” For readings of gender, see Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality*, 27–65, as well as Mittman and Kim, “Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England.”

¹⁵ Mittman, “Headless Men and Hungry Monsters.” This piece was published through *Sarum Seminar*; In it, Mittman notes that the paper is originally an abridgment of the second chapter of his Ph.D. dissertation, “Living at the Edge of the World: Marginality and Monstrosity in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts and Beyond.”

of genitalia in frontal, apparently nude, depictions of the Blemmye, the Tiberius and Vitellius images expose early medieval English fears of bodies outside the normative sexually reproducing.¹⁶ In effect, analyzing the Blemmye illuminates the treatment of congenital disability as seen in *Wonders of the East* and challenges flattened perspectives of disability in the Middle Ages as being “divinely ordained” or the end result of sin. Rather, the Blemmye becomes a historically situated embodiment of how the early medieval English constructed disability as a phenomenon that unravels binary logic (that normal is distinct from abnormal, sexuality from asexuality, masculine from feminine) and obliterates whatever stability viewers may have of themselves as “normal”—much like modern understandings of disability.

Modern versus Medieval: A Brief Overview of Disability Studies

Scholars have tended to mythologize the rise of modernity as the birthplace of “disability” as a unified concept, while offering readers a few cursory sentences involving murder, infanticide, and despair when discussing disability during the medieval period.¹⁷ One of the added challenges for medieval disability scholars in particular is the lack of a unified concept of “disability” and “normal” within the respective time period.¹⁸ However, there were undoubtedly disabling qualities in life, as there are in contemporary society, that affected one’s ability to perform and participate in what would have been considered standard life activities. Outside the work of medieval disability scholars,

¹⁶ On the representation of the Blemmye’s genitalia (or lack thereof) in manuscript illustrations, see Mittman and Kim, “The Exposed Body and the Gendered Blemmye” and Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality*, 27–65.

¹⁷ See, for example, Stiker, *A History of Disability*, 65–90; Covey, *Social Perceptions of People with Disabilities in History*, 1–43 and 58–60.

¹⁸ See Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

current disability scholarship tends to diminish the nuance of disability in the Middle Ages.¹⁹ Therefore, this project adds to the current work of medieval studies and disability theory by recognizing the Old English *Wonders of the East* as a medieval source offering new opportunities for reading early medieval English cultural reactions to impairment and somatic differences.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines impairment as “the action of impairing, or fact of being impaired”; impaired being “rendered worse; injured in amount, quality, or value; deteriorated, weakened, damaged.”²⁰ Based on the *OED* definition, the English language inherently evokes denotations of quality, value, weakness, and damage when discussing impairment. Rather than using such definitions, Dan Goodley cites the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation: “impairment is the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment.”²¹ Whereas the *OED* brings suggestions of “value” and “damage” when discussing impairment, current disability scholarship complicates such definitions through acknowledging a distinction between disability and impairment. The UPIAS’s definition recognizes “the presence of impairment but attend[s] to disability.”²² In other words, disability scholarship argues that impairment is the physical reality of

¹⁹ As Godden and Hsy point out, there are a growing number of scholars who are challenging flattened notions of disability in the Middle Ages (“Analytical Survey”). Some examples include Pearman, *Women and Disability in the Middle Ages*; Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind*; and Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, as well as the recent collection *Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World*, edited by Godden and Mittman.

²⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, “impaired”, adj., accessed 4 March 2020, <https://www-oed-com.lynx.lib.usm.edu/view/Entry/92051?rskey=5tN0cB&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

²¹ Goodley, *Disability Studies*, 9.

²² Ibid.

the body that is often defined within a medical context, while “disability” is “understood as the negative social reactions” to those bodily realities—e.g. when disabled persons are viewed as “damaged” or “rendered worse,” as the *OED* suggests.²³ Despite there being several different models and conceptualizations of disability, contemporary disability theorists agree that disability is constructed, performative, and separate from impairment (to a degree).²⁴ *What produces the construction of disability and how it produces disability is where theorists tend to diverge into distinct models of disability.*²⁵ I will engage with the cultural model of disability, paying particular attention to key disability theorist, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson.

Garland-Thomson exemplifies the transdisciplinary nature of disability studies across the social sciences *and* humanities.²⁶ By bringing forth their cultural and literary analyses, scholars such as Garland-Thomson are shaping contemporary understandings of disability and how the disabled body “becomes a repository for social anxieties about such [...] concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity.”²⁷ According to the cultural model, “Disability is a cultural trope and historical community that raises questions

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The cultural model of disability argues that there is not a total distinction between “disability” and “impairment.” By doing so, the cultural model is more in tune with the biological reality of the body by acknowledging that disability might come from the pain of impairment.

²⁵ Goodley surveys the history of disability activist movements, as well as different models comprising what he labels the “disability studies matrix” (*Disability Studies*, 9). These models include: the individual model, the medical model, social model, the minority model, the cultural model, and the relational model.

²⁶ Garland-Thomson is listed alongside scholars such as Lennard Davis, David Mitchell, Simi Linton, Sharon Snyder, and several others for engaging in discourses involving disability in conjunction with other theoretical frameworks (Goodley, *Disability Studies*, 13). Until scholars like Garland-Thomson, the social model in the North American and Canadian regions was popularly employed in the “social scientific environment of disciplines such as education, sociology and social policy” (Goodley, *Disability Studies*, 13). Now, however, the cultural model is quickly gaining ground alongside the social model.

²⁷ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 6.

about the materiality of the body and the social formulations that are used to interpret bodily and cognitive differences.”²⁸ Additionally, in contrast to the other models, “*cultural modelist scholars* reject a firm distinction between impairment and disability because they view biology and culture as impinging upon one another.”²⁹ Cultural disability theorists acknowledge that the biological reality of the impairment may not exist neutrally; even if a person is fully accommodated, an impairment can still be a source of pain and self-dissonance, which are disabling in their own right regardless of any cultural or social impact.

Additionally, cultural disability modelists “have exposed the reliance of the normal body on the disabled body.”³⁰ The disabled or abnormal body is the “needed opposite” for being able to conceptualize and define “what we mean by a normal or able body.”³¹ In other words, concepts of normalcy are constructed through a necessary oppositional relationship with disability—“normal” is that which disability is not.³² Garland-Thomson identifies the phantom figure of “normate” embodiment and emphasizes its near total fictionality; she argues that to be part of the “normate,” according to the current Western cultural and social standards set forth, is almost entirely impossible.³³ Additionally, she suggests that it is through how we look at one another that we come to know each other: “We enlist intense visual scrutiny to gather knowledge,

²⁸ Goodley, *Disability Studies*, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 23–49.

³³ Garland-Thomson *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8.

answer questions, shape narratives, and explain dissonance.”³⁴ Thus, examining the gaze as it is directed at (or more precisely, forced upon) bodies with impairment is crucial to deepening our understandings of disability as socially and culturally constructed, because disabled bodies become a source of visual “dissonance.” For example, physical evidence of impairment—whether it be a cane, a wheelchair, or a prosthetic limb—unconsciously draws a viewer’s gaze towards the impairment because it visually disrupts what is understood to be the “normal” order of our surroundings.³⁵

When considering the Blemmye and their respective manuscript images in light of Garland-Thomson’s analysis of staring as a move towards dominance, knowledge-gathering, and story-crafting, *Wonders of the East* becomes a medieval text that offers new possibilities for understanding disability from an early medieval English perspective. Early medieval drawings of the Blemmyes serve as a premodern example of the layered, complex dynamic of staring by illustrating the Blemmye as staring back in both the Tiberius and Vitellius images of the Blemmye.³⁶ Thus, my argument complicates assumptions of “modernity” in notions such as the “*modern* binary [of] normal/abnormal,” which imply that disability in the Middle Ages was nonexistent or

³⁴ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 49.

³⁵ This being said, many scholars also point out that what is “disabling” in culture, modern or otherwise, involves visible, physical impairment and much more. The fluid and overarching nature of disability results in intersectional conversations involving feminist, gender, racial, and economic concerns, because an individual’s racial and gender identity, along with their economic status, can be disabling. Garland-Thomson also argues that disability should be treated as a *universal* concern because, if we live long enough, we will all eventually acquire disability due to the biological realities of aging. See *Extraordinary Bodies*, 14.

³⁶ This suggests a point of consistency among the illustrations with respect to the depiction of the visual relationship between the Blemmye and the viewer.

eradicated by showing that the early medieval English were indeed grappling with issues of bodily variation and disability.³⁷

This is especially evident when considering the Blemmye as a source of visual “novelty” comparable to the extraordinary bodies seen in historical freakshows. In her discussion of American freak shows during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Garland-Thomson acknowledges that “conventions of displaying and interpreting the extraordinary body [...] go back to the beginning of human history.”³⁸ The manuscript images of the Blemmye serve as a previously unrecognized historic example of this practice of “displaying and interpreting the extraordinary body.” By being visually displayed in manuscripts, the Blemmye functions as an “icon” the early medieval English used to “discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies.”³⁹ Thus, *Wonders of the East* serves to suggest that the early medieval English may have understood the body as “a complex focus for competing power structures,” and the Blemmye as an imagined conduit for reading early medieval English anxieties and social expectations for “normal” bodies.⁴⁰

“Born without heads”: The Blemmye as a Source of Congenital Disability

Ideas of congenital somatic difference are present within *Wonders of the East* through the narrator’s use of the term “born.” According to the narrator of *The Wonders*:

³⁷ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 129; emphasis added.

³⁸ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 56.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 11.

There is another island south of the Bryxontis on which men are born without heads, who have their eyes and mouth in their chests. They are eight feet tall and eight feet broad.

Dragons are born there which are in length one-hundred-fifty feet long, and are as thick as great stone columns.⁴¹

By referring to the Blemmyes being “born,” the description of the Blemmyes evokes ideas of procreation and reproduction. While I am using a translation of the original text in my primary analysis, this same analysis still applies when considering the original Old English text.⁴² In the Old English, the narrator states “menn akende.” According to the *Dictionary of Old English* “akende” is a form of “a-cennan” meaning “to generate, to bear or bring forth, give birth (to), of a mother: to bear or bring forth (a child), to conceive and give birth to (someone).”⁴³

Another point to consider is the narrator’s use of the term “men” in reference to the Blemmyes. In the Old English, the Blemmyes are referred to as “menn”—the plural form of “man.” The *Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* defines “man” as a “human being of either sex.”⁴⁴ Therefore, modern translations tend to misconstrue the Blemmye as overly masculine through transposing the Old English “menn” to the modern “men.” It is perhaps more adequate to use a term such as “persons,” “people,” or even “humans” since these are not indicative of gender or sex in the ways that “men” is today.

⁴¹ Swanton, trans. “The Wonders of the East,” 230.

⁴² Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 192.

⁴³ *Dictionary of Old English*, “a-cennan,” vb., accessed June 10, 2020, <https://tapor-library-utoronto-ca.lynx.lib.usm.edu/doe/>.

⁴⁴ *Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, “man,” accessed May 25, 2020, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/022348>.

Furthermore, all of this cumulatively emphasizes the *humanness* of the Blemmye. In *Wonders of the East*, the Blemmyes are not distinguished as the “Blemmye”; instead, they are only labelled as “men” and the name is drawn from analogous sources.⁴⁵ Consequently, what can be seen as a monstrous birth—born headless with facial features in the chest—is situated within the realm of human possibility. The term “born” carries connotations of procreation/reproduction, while “men” brings suggestions of humanness to the text; in conjunction with one another, these terms suggest qualities of humanness that situate the Blemmye closer to humanity and further from monstrosity than we might have expected. Therefore, analysis of the textual representation of the Blemmye reveals connections between congenital physical difference and monstrosity, which consequently reinforces the suggestion that the early medieval English were wrestling with conceptualizations of disability—particularly those bodies that are visually different from the norm—and intermingling concepts of monstrosity and disability within the text.

The idea of “acquired” disability has captured much critical consideration, whereas disability developed at or before birth—i.e. congenital disability—remains comparatively less discussed. Congenital disability is much less common than acquired

⁴⁵ The etymology of “Blemmye” is still a topic of discussion among scholars. Mittman states that the Blemmye have come to be identified as the Blemmye by their “hereditary physical features” or what he calls their “Blemmye-ness” (“Are the monstrous ‘races’ races?” 42–42). Mittman affirms that the Blemmye “are described fairly consistently [...] over the course two millennia, from Herodotus of Halicarnassus (fifth century BCE) to Columbus (fifteenth century CE)” (41–42). In his *Cyclopædia*, Ephraim Chambers (ca. 1680–1740) wrote an encyclopedic entry concerning the history of the term “Blemmyes”: “People suppos’d to be without Heads, and to have their Eyes and Mouth in their Breast; mentioned by *P. Mela*, and other ancient authors. They are suppos’d to have inhabited Part of *Æthiopia*. Some Authors derive the Fable of the *Blemmyes* from this, that their Heads were hid between their Shoulders, by hoisting those up to an extravagant Height. *Bochart* derives the Word *Blemmyes* from (בלִי) which implies a Negation, and (מוח), *Brain*: In which Sense the *Blemmyes* must have been People without Brains” (107). “*Bochart*” refers to Samuel Bochart (1599–1667), a seventeenth-century French protestant biblical scholar who draws on the Hebrew language to explain the term “Blemmye.”

disability; as Davis points out, “only 15 percent of people with disabilities are born with their impairments.”⁴⁶ To an even further extent, congenital disability in the Middle Ages remains a relatively elusive topic. Emily Cock and Patricia Skinner state, “There is surprisingly little work on congenital disfigurement in medieval thought”; other non-medievalists tend to generalize the medieval reaction to congenital disability as infanticide and neglect.⁴⁷ However, the historical and archaeological record for the time period provides little evidence for this. In actuality, there are several medieval medicinal texts that reveal deliberate efforts to cure and prevent various ailments, including disorders of the ear, tongue, and eye, among much else.⁴⁸ These texts, such as Bald’s *Leechbook*, also point towards efforts to determine the causes of congenital disability to presumably prevent it. As Irina Metzler writes, “One of the key areas of medieval aetiologies of impairment related to ideas about the conception of children, and what impact various internal and external factors had on foetal development.”⁴⁹ These texts, while not explicitly concerned with disability in the modern sense, are concerned with what we would now call impairment—the biological reality of the body. The impairments themselves, if left untreated and unaccommodated, would arguably lead to disability.

Garland-Thomson’s asserts that:

⁴⁶ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 8.

⁴⁷ Cock and Skinner, “(Dis)functional Faces,” 98.

⁴⁸ For a thorough discussion of medieval medicines and specific cases, see Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, 65–125. See also Parker, “Healing the Unborn,” for more information regarding congenital disability in early medieval England.

⁴⁹ Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, 123.

the ways bodies interact with the socially engineered environment and conform to social expectations determine the varying degree of disability or able-bodied-ness, of extra-ordinariness or ordinariness.

Consequently, the meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationships [...] ⁵⁰

Understanding disability as determined by how well bodies “conform to social expectations” adds newfound layers to the Blemmye as a potential source for reading disability from the early medieval English perspective. The early medieval English certainly had their own set of social expectations, and when using this categorization of disability, new historic figures of disability emerge for their nonconformity to bodily norms including the extra-ordinary Blemmyes. By being an imagined—i.e. fictional—figure of disability, the Blemmyes also “becomes a repository for [reading] social anxieties” present in the early medieval English consciousness.⁵¹ As this thesis demonstrates, these anxieties include concerns of identity, sexuality, procreation, and somatic differences.

Based on the narrator’s description of the Blemmyes as men “born without heads, who have their eyes and mouth in their chest,” readers can recognize familiar humanly features—eyes, mouth, chest—and the manuscript illustrations of the Blemmye also show how human-adjacent their features are.⁵² The curiously familiar human qualities of the Blemmyes in combination with what can be seen as a monstrous placement of those

⁵⁰ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵² Swanton, trans., “Wonders of the East,” 230.

features results in a sense of novelty and estrangement for viewers. This is because the Blemmye functions as a nonnormative “re-presentation of our own form.”⁵³ The Blemmye body does not conform to ordinary social expectations of what bodies *should* look like and thus falls under the category of disability as laid out by Garland-Thomson. Nonconformity with respect to bodily standards situates the Blemmyes in the realm of disability, which in turn reveals certain anxieties amongst the early medieval English about bodily norms. Again, it is not their physical differences, perceived as flaws or deviations, that inherently characterize the Blemmye as a potential source of reading disability, but rather the meanings attached to those differences and the early medieval English social reactions to their physical form that invite disability into the conversation. It is important to first establish what would be considered a deviating physical form to medieval audiences, and whether the Blemmyes fit such considerations, prior to analyzing the possible meanings attached to their bodies.

Saint Augustine of Hippo’s (354–430 CE) early fifth-century ideas of what Christians should expect of their resurrected bodies in the afterlife reveals that the early medieval English had (or were at least exposed to) ideas of what “normal” bodies were expected to be. As Leah Pope Parker argues, this served as a norming force that would justify stigma against bodies that did not conform to expectations of the resurrection body.⁵⁴ Because Augustine’s theological work was widely influential in early medieval Christianity, including in early medieval England, the existence of bodily norms against which to judge nonconforming bodies suggests that the Blemmye body, with its absent

⁵³ Mittman, “Headless Men and Hungry Monsters,” 12.

⁵⁴ Parker, trans., “*City of God against the Pagans*,” 157–58.

head and displaced face, would not fit Augustine's ideas of "better" bodies—which "stigmatizes bodily difference, from being 'too thin or too fat' to having 'rare and monstrous deformities.'"⁵⁵ Scholars including Edward Wheatley and Deborah Marks suggest one common way of understanding disability in the Middle Ages is recognizing disabilities and signs of deformity—e.g. the "deformities [...] that are rare and monstrous" Augustine refers to—as indicators of moral failings and transgressions.⁵⁶ Wheatley writes that in the Christian Middle Ages, "the church created a complex set of attitudes towards people with disabilities that resulted in a kind of stigmatization" wherein "disability could be read as a sign of sociopolitical sinfulness, which is to say criminality."⁵⁷ Consequently, the Blemmye's somatic differences would also likely have been viewed from the early medieval English perspective as a sign of deformity and therefore a marker of sin, divine retribution, or a tainted soul.⁵⁸ In viewing the Blemmye's somatic differences, Mittman situates the absent head as "his most severe bodily mutilation" and a "mark of deep-seated moral failing."⁵⁹ The social ramifications of being seen as marred by sin in a society heavily dependent on Christian thought would

⁵⁵ Ibid., 157. See Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, for a discussion of the significance and accessibility of Augustine's work during the early Middle Ages.

⁵⁶ Parker, trans., "*City of God against the Pagans*," 159. See also Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind*; and Mark, *Disability*. Metzler critiques several histories of disability for their cursory glances towards disability in the Middle Ages as one that singularly regarded the impaired as "completely expendable"; she states "This belief of modern authors that ancient or medieval societies *invariably* saw a link between sin and illness appears to the dominant historiographical notion on the subject of disability" (*Disability in Medieval Europe*, 9).

⁵⁷ Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind*, 20.

⁵⁸ While this perspective, as well as cases of infanticide and extermination happened, this is not the exclusive response to disability in the Middle Ages. In fact, Covey notes that "numerous attempts were made to cure and care for people with physical disabilities," especially in regard to children with physical disability during the Middle Ages. Covey discusses "a full range of theories and practices" meant to cure or treat people with disability, ranging from physical practices to "efforts involved" in Christianity (*Social Perceptions of People with Disabilities in History*, 59).

⁵⁹ Mittman, "Headless Men and Hungry Monsters," 9.

presumably prompt responses akin to disabling ostracization and exclusion for those with visible markers of somatic difference. Even as an imaginary figure, the Blemmyes are isolated within the text by being geographically situated in the perceived monstrous East, a place where, according to the narrator, “nobody can travel easily.”⁶⁰

Additionally, I propose that a more nuanced understanding of the Blemmye’s possible interpretation as morally deviant may be obtained when considering early medieval English uses of corporal punishment as a way of signifying moral failings and sin through the absence of body parts. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe examines the legal politics of the body in Anglo-Saxon England, arguing that the body comes to be exploited to know and subsequently control the individual through methods of mutilation during the medieval era: for the Anglo-Saxons, “to view those eyeless, noseless faces, those scalpless heads, arms without hands, legs without feet is to read upon their bodies the legal exactment of punishment for crimes.”⁶¹ Through bodily mutilation, “Guilt was manifest, visible, and legible on the body.”⁶² O’Brien O’Keeffe’s understanding of Anglo-Saxon legal body politics has a noticeable visual emphasis to it: the mutilation must be overtly “visible” for viewers to *see* the guilt of the transgressor. The visual emphasis present within Anglo-Saxon legal politics recalls ideas Metzler discusses with respect to the relationships between impairment, disability, and visibility.⁶³ As Metzler observes, “the more noticeable an impairment is to others, the more of a disability it

⁶⁰ Swanton, trans., “Wonders of the East,” 230.

⁶¹ O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” 214–15.

⁶² Mittman, “Headless Men and Hungry Monsters,” 9.

⁶³ For more information about the relationship between impairment, disability, and visibility, see Garland-Thomson, *Staring*.

becomes. Greater visibility of an impairment would therefore bring with it greater cultural or social consequences for the affected individual.”⁶⁴ Impairment, disability, and visibility are thus in perpetual conversation with one another, and that conversation extends beyond just “disability” in the Middle Ages and into a greater discourse involving the cultural and social politics of the body and how the body serves as a tool for articulating guilt and wrongness from the view and in support of the normate. The Anglo-Saxon judiciary system perpetuated *visible* impairment and therefore *disability* through mutilation as punishment for delinquent behavior. Because the Anglo-Saxon cultural systems at play—particularly those of a legal nature—used visible mutilation for judiciary punishment, criminals were turned into stareable objects and the absence of limbs served to denote wrongdoing and transgression in the early medieval English perspective.⁶⁵ In this way, somatic differences—particularly noticeably absent body parts—would have been read as a marker of sin and criminality, regardless of those differences being congenital or inflicted.

Because the Blemmyes are described as being “*born* without heads,” their absent head is situated as a congenital physical difference, rather than one that is inflicted or acquired.⁶⁶ The Blemmye is a humanoid figure; the only way such a figure can exist without a head is to have been born with all necessary, animative parts found within the skull repositioned in an acephalous fashion. This, as well as the term “born” itself, gives rise to connotations of congenital differences and, for it to be congenital, procreation has

⁶⁴ Metzler, 4.

⁶⁵ That being said, bodily mutilation was not *always* used as legal exactment for crimes. Other methods of imprisonment and fines were also often used in medieval judicial proceedings. See O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” 215.

⁶⁶ Swanton, trans., “Wonders of the East,” 230; emphasis added.

to occur—which denotes the reproductive capacities of the Blemmyes. Therefore, the Blemmye’s missing head becomes a natural, hereditary consequence of their reproduction. By being naturally headless *and* situated within the realm of humanity, the Blemmye endanger categories of “normal” bodies by invading spaces which are meant to be reserved for the normate. When the perceived monstrous is so human-adjacent as the Blemmye, the distinctly “monstrous” collapses, and with it, goes any means of defining the normate. Because the normate itself relies on binary opposition for definition, the Blemmye challenge the normate through complicating binary distinctions, such as that between the human and the monster. The Blemmye, then, remind audiences of the permeability of the boundaries we rely on to define normalcy.

The passage in *Wonders* immediately following the cursory description of the Blemmyes also reinforces the idea that monstrosity and humanity are not situated in entirely different spaces. As the narrator states, “Dragons are born there”; “there” refers to the island on which the Blemmyes are also born and live.⁶⁷ By coexisting in a shared space with dragons, the Blemmyes become associated with explicit monstrosity. Not only do the Blemmyes and dragons live within the same space, both are said to be “born” there. Thus, the Blemmye’s birth space is presented as a place in which both monsters and men are born, again supporting the notion that the two are perhaps not as indistinguishable as we (the human, possibly temporarily able-bodied) readers of the *Wonders* might prefer. However, the Blemmyes are still explicitly Othered in the Western imagination in a variety of ways.⁶⁸ For instance, they are geographically situated in the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ While postcolonial criticism exceeds the scope of this thesis, this feature of *Wonders of the East* recalls Edward Said’s statement that the Western imaginative construction of the Orient “is more

“Other” place of the East. Their visible physical form drastically deviates from the Western standards of normal bodies, and their space of existence is shared with fantastical beasts.

Despite all of this, the Blemmyes remain humanoid figures more familiar and comparable to the medieval person viewing the manuscript than the dragons with whom the Blemmyes reside. Because of this, the Blemmye’s body—a jumbled amalgamation of unfamiliar monstrosity and familiar humanity—exposes, and thereby threatens, any fantasy of normalcy for medieval viewers by not distinctly serving as an outright opposing body through which the normate can define themselves against. This is why the Blemmye matters in view of disability: they are a historic example defying notions of normalcy and the able body. It is easy to say “I am unlike a dragon”; to be distinct from a Blemmye proves to be more of a challenge.

The Abjected Blemmye: Applying the Powers of Disgust

Part of the early medieval English anxiety towards the Blemmyes stems from intrigue and desire for the Blemmye body as consequence of their monstrous form. The Blemmyes are monstrous and abject, but still invite fascination from the viewer. A brief rehearsal is warranted here of Mittman’s discussion of the abjected Blemmye’s desirability. Mittman argues that desire for the Blemmye body remains *despite* the anxieties surrounding their reproduction as a source of monstrosity and disability, when considering the power of disgust: to simultaneously repel and attract. Mittman’s work

particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient” (*Orientalism*, 6).

serves as a crucial foundational piece for discussing the fear surrounding the Blemmyes' reproduction as "monstrous humans."⁶⁹

Mittman frames the Blemmyes within the purview of disgust and the abjection by discussing how the Blemmye simultaneously repel and attract through their bodies that are both unfamiliar and familiar: the more loathsome, the more compelling. The spatial organization of the Blemmye body is not only shockingly repulsive to the human eye, but also curiously captivating.⁷⁰ He aligns the Blemmye's physicality with Julia Kristeva's notions of the abject: "that of being opposed to I [...] the place where meaning collapses."⁷¹ Mittman argues that the Blemmye serves as an abject figure: a being that leads us forward as it separates us. He supports this notion through summarizing William Miller's argument concerning the powers of disgust. Mittman states:

Disgust must always repel in some sense or it is not disgust. Repulsion, however, might bring in its train affects that work to move one closer again to what one just backed away from. These affects could range from curiosity, to fascination, *to a desire to mingle*. Repulsion can also raise resentment for having been repelled and a consequent desire to reclaim lost territory. And that too draws one forward again.⁷²

The Blemmye's humanoid form rouses an intriguing sense of familiarity from their viewers; however, their absent head and displaced face simultaneously estranges viewers

⁶⁹ Mittman, "Headless Men and Hungry Monsters," 14.

⁷⁰ See Mittman's "Headless Men and Hungry Monsters" for further discussion of the Blemmye, as well as other Wonders including the Donestre, Essedones, Sciopod, and Homodubii, as abject.

⁷¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2–3.

⁷² Mittman, "Headless Men and Hungry Monsters," 8; emphasis added.

in its alarming unfamiliarity. It is this consequent repulsion of the Blemmye's body that also draws us as readers of the *Wonders* toward them.

It is important to recognize that Mittman's perspective of the Blemmye leans into perceptions of horror and monstrosity, without considering the Blemmye as a source of (congenital) disability. To Mittman's argument that the Blemmye's physicality is disgusting, I would add that the Blemmye's physical differences can also be framed within the context of congenital disability. Because the Blemmye serves as a figure for both disgust and disability, the Blemmye illuminates how the early medieval English may have perceived congenital somatic differences as monstrous.

The Blemmyes' visible physical difference elicits fascination from viewers, and this fascination evokes desire—a desire to overtake or “reclaim.” Garland-Thomson argues that persons with disability arouse a strikingly similar reaction of simultaneous repulsion and fascination as that held by Miller and Mittman to be disgusting; people are compelled to both stare and look away.⁷³ Likewise, the Blemmye compels us to look not only as a source of disgust and abjection, but also as a novelty that inspires intense interest. According to Garland-Thomson, seeing the visibly impaired inspires a similar reaction of both wanting to stare but also wanting to look away. She argues that “we stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more.”⁷⁴ We stare when something or someone unfamiliar presents itself, and staring serves as the interrogative technique we employ to potentially know the unfamiliar and thereby wrestle it to comfortable

⁷³ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

familiarity.⁷⁵ If the Blemmye arrests our gaze, as Mittman suggests, it is because our gaze fails to comprehend the novel body before us—meaning that the visual *status quo* does not account for such bodily differences.

Kristeva argues that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”⁷⁶ Mittman explains how the Blemmye’s missing head is “the very definition of the disgusting” and the source of the Blemmye’s abjection for medieval audiences.⁷⁷ However, if we are to think of the Blemmyes as abject, the following questions still remain: how does the Blemmye disturb the “identity, system, [and] order” of the early medieval English? What “borders” do they penetrate, and what “rules” do they pervert?⁷⁸ By refuting standards of binary categorization, the Blemmyes are a source of intolerable ambiguity with respect to sex and humanness. They are not entirely female or male, human or monster, and by extension, normal or abnormal. Instead, the Blemmyes are fluid in these aspects of identity that social and cultural expectations need to be rigid and firm in their distinction. By being so, the Blemmye collapses binary-driven distinction and therefore an easy sense of identity-making for their medieval viewers. The Blemmyes reveal a world in which ambiguity is dominant and distinction is infringing—the revelation being that their world is our own.

As noted prior, Mittman suggests that the Blemmye would be an embodiment of disgust to Anglo-Saxon viewers; he argues that while the Blemmye’s “decapitation” is

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

⁷⁷ Mittman, “Headless Men and Hungry Monsters,” 9.

⁷⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

his most severe bodily mutilation, “the exact nature of his crime is not relevant.”⁷⁹

However, in a society that is deeply invested in, to borrow Shyama Rajendran’s phrase, “*what* they reproduce” as a means of forming identity and imagined futures, then determining the nature of a crime that results in removing the bodily capacity to procreate is incredibly relevant.⁸⁰ This is because, as the next section will demonstrate, understanding the Blemmyes’ crime with respect to disability *and* monstrosity comes not only with their absent head, but also with their castration.

Fear of Monstrous Procreation: Obscuring the Blemmye’s Genitalia

This section pursues image analysis of the representation of the Blemmye’s genitalia, as well as other secondary sex characteristics, in both the Vitellius and Tiberius manuscripts in order to illuminate procreative anxieties the early medieval English may have had towards the reproduction of congenital somatic differences. In the Tiberius image, the Blemmye is depicted in pale ink against a reddish background with faint orange outlining the inner exterior features (see Figure 1, above). The Blemmye’s sex is unclear as a dark ink blotch obscures the genitalia. The Blemmye’s body actively contests boundaries and systems of order as they prove too much for restraint by grasping and extending beyond the physical frame enclosing their bodies with their hands and polydactyl feet.⁸¹ In this way, the Tiberius Blemmye is poised, ready to exit the imagined realm of the manuscript and burst into the world of their viewers. Based on the Tiberius image, placing the Blemmye within a physical frame enacts a containment of the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Shyama Rajendran, “E(race)ing the Future,” 131.

⁸¹ See Mittman, “Headless Men and Hungry Monsters,” 10 for further discussion on the Blemmye grasping the frame.

Blemmye by the makers of this manuscript; the frame itself acts as the physical, metaphoric “barrier of disgust” against “unconscious desires,” such as the “attraction most disgusting things hold.”⁸² Additionally, the absence of genitalia, despite the apparent nudity of the Blemmye, suggests an unwillingness on the part of the early medieval English to recognize the Blemmye as a procreative, sexual being.

The Vitellius image of the Blemmye (see Figure 2) has received more critical



Figure 2. *Vitellius Portrait of a Blemmye*

London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A. xv, f. 102v,

late tenth or early eleventh century. Courtesy of the British Library Catalogue of illuminated Manuscripts. The Blemmye is drawn in a faint brown outline against a red background.

The Blemmye’s right arm reaches across the chest as the Blemmye frowns and stares directly at viewers. The sex of the Blemmye is unclear as a triangular panel with wavy lines is situated in the genital region.

attention than the Tiberius image. Unlike the Tiberius image, it is unclear whether or not the Blemmye is even exposed or clothed. Mittman and Kim highlight a higher level ambiguity present in the Vitellius image of the Blemmye; considering the Blemmye as exposed in the Vitellius image, Mittman and Kim write that there is “triangular panel”

situated “at what would be his groin.”⁸³ This suggests that, regardless of whether or not the Blemmye is clothed, the representation of the Blemmye’s genitalia was a genuine concern for early medieval audiences, not solely one artist of one manuscript, as it is

⁸² Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 110.

⁸³ Mittman and Kim, “The Exposed Body and the Gendered Blemmye,” 176.

obscured in both the Tiberius and Vitellius images. These illustrations help reveal the anxiety the early medieval English may have had surrounding the possibility of sexually reproducing bodies that fall outside of the normative. I suggest that figuratively removing the Blemmye's ability to procreate is a move to imagine a halt to the sexual reproduction of impairment, which exposes a stigma towards congenital differences within the early Middle Ages.

The disability community has long been inspiration for and subjected to various representations of their perceived sexuality. Historically and contemporarily, the disabled are often presented as either hypersexual with uncontrollable urges or totally unerotic and incapable of sex.⁸⁴ By comparing the cultural and visual reception of the Venus de Milo to Pam Herbert, a quadriplegic woman, Lennard Davis argues that the relationship between disability and sexuality, disfigurement and ugliness, is determined by the observer (the one looking) and not by the observed subject (the one being looked at).⁸⁵ Davis argues that “the disabled body is always the reminder of the whole body about to come apart at the seams” and thus, it unnerves, unsettles, cautions, and reminds us—assumed to self-identify as the “normal” ones—how illusory our normalcy is.⁸⁶

When viewing the Blemmye's exposed body in the Tiberius image, there is a dark blotch surrounded by what might resemble pubic hair where there should be a clear presence or marker of genitalia.⁸⁷ Dana Oswald argues that this spot obscures and

⁸⁴ The representation of the disabled as hypersexual with uncontrollable urges can be seen in *The New Pope* scene referenced in the introduction.

⁸⁵ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 127.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁷ Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality*, 27.

therefore acts as an “erasure” of the Blemmye’s genitals despite the narrator’s assertion that the Blemmyes are “born,” which denotes the presence of sexual organs.⁸⁸ Oswald discusses three different types of erasure: never-drawing, removing, and revising: “never-drawing” refers to never presenting the bodies as sexed in the first place; “removal” is the literal excision performed perhaps by a scribe, artist, or viewer; and “in acts of revision, the artist [...] changes details of the image so that the effect or message of the image shifts.”⁸⁹ In the Tiberius manuscript, rather than artists removing what might be the more exaggerated, monstrous aspects of the Blemmye body, the “most *human* elements—the genitals and secondary sex characteristics” are removed.⁹⁰

In the Tiberius manuscript, Oswald claims that, even through the blotch, viewers can see vague outlines of what seems to resemble a human penis.⁹¹ The artists have enacted an illustrative castration of the Blemmye as evidenced by the darkened ink obscuring the genitalia. Oswald argues that this is because “The only way to deal with the monstrous body [...] is to remove it, or at least the parts of it that seem the most human, most implicated in the human reproductive cycle, and therefore most challenging to human identity.”⁹² When considering the Blemmye body as a source of both repulsion and attraction, obscuring the genitalia is an act that acknowledges the “monstrous sexuality and reproductive potential” present within the Blemmye body.⁹³

⁸⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 28; emphasis added.

⁹¹ Ibid., 51.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

Oswald focuses on the treatment of the Blemmye's genitalia as a move against perpetuating monstrosity, while also recognizing the Blemmye's innate humanness. I would add that ignoring the Blemmye's capacity to procreate by obscuring their genitalia suggests an endeavor to halt the perpetuation of their hereditary traits—which consist of both monstrosity and somatic difference akin to visibly impaired bodies. For the Vitellius manuscript, Oswald suggests that the Blemmye's genitalia were never drawn, and so both the Vitellius and Tiberius representations of the Blemmye suggest a consistent effort to avoid recognizing the Blemmyes as sexual, procreative beings. In so doing, the early medieval English treatment of the Blemmye serves as an example of premodern eugenic logic. Garland-Thomson argues that “eugenic logic tells us that our world would be a better place if disability could be eliminated.”⁹⁴ While eugenic logic is considered by Garland-Thomson to be a modern phenomenon, Parker demonstrates that eleventh-century prognostic and hagiographical texts reveal a clear anxiety about “the [spiritual] stakes associated with having a child with disability.”⁹⁵ According to Parker, the desired society in England is a society without disability, making children with disability undesirable.

Illustrations of the Blemmye challenge scholarly views of “normal/abnormal” as singularly a “modern binary,” despite there being no exact terms for labelling “disability” and “normal” at the time of the Tiberius and Vitellius manuscripts’ respective creation.⁹⁶ The Tiberius representation of the Blemmye affirms early medieval conceptions of how

⁹⁴ Garland-Thomson, “The Case for Conserving Disability,” 339–40.

⁹⁵ I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Leah Pope Parker for sharing her forthcoming essay, “Healing the Unborn.” She is among a handful of dedicated scholars working to better our understanding of congenital disability in the medieval period.

⁹⁶ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 129.

bodies should and should not look in order to be treated as “normal,” in a notably *premodern* sense. Obscuring the genitalia suggests that when those bodies deviate, the appropriate response is to target the bodily sites responsible for procreation in order to prevent perceived monstrous reproduction.

Rather than using methods of scientific categorization, many medieval Europeans worked through bodily complexities by imagining wonderful, monstrous bodies capable of sexually reproducing more wonderful, monstrous bodies. Rajendran argues that stories of reproduction and birth function as “imagined futures” contributing to the erasure of identity and the underscored point that “*who* reproduces matters.”⁹⁷ The children themselves present the imagined future and how they are formed determines what that potential future also looks like, which can result in “identity elimination.”⁹⁸ Mittman takes note of the Blemmyes’ “mating potential” and how they “seem to be produced by parents like themselves.”⁹⁹ In understanding the Blemmyes as sexually reproductive creatures, readers are invited to then imagine their offspring. The narrator of *The Wonders* already tells us that there are men “born without heads, who have their eyes and mouth in their chest.”¹⁰⁰ In a world in which people without heads are being sexually reproduced, what then, does the future begin to look like, and whose identity is potentially eliminated? Based on the illustrative unsexing of the Blemmye, it appears to have been a prospective future that at least some people in early medieval English believed needed to be prevented in order to preserve their identity as normative and able-

⁹⁷ Rajendran, “E(race)ing the Future,” 131.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 129–31.

⁹⁹ Mittman, “Are the ‘Monstrous Races’ Races?” 42.

¹⁰⁰ Swanton, trans., “Wonders of the East,” 230.

bodied. Oswald writes that, for the Anglo-Saxons, “Bodies that blur too many categories (for instance, the animal and the human, or the male and the female) are the most dangerous, and must be censured and censored.”¹⁰¹ As established in previous sections, the Blemmyes defy such definitive categorizing and are therefore “dangerous” to the early medieval English self that relies on distinction for construction. This threat of the Blemmye results in the illustrative censorship of the Blemmye’s sexed body.

As noted above, the early medieval English inflicted bodily mutilation as punishment for crimes; castration in particular was commonly used as a method to punish crimes of a sexual nature.¹⁰² Therefore, the illustrative unsexing of the Blemmye—i.e. castrating the Blemmye through obscuring or erasing their genitalia—in addition to the artist situating their mutilation in full-frontal display for viewers, becomes a message coding their sexual reproduction as an act of sin. Because the mutilation of the body on behalf of judiciary systems served as a means to read a person’s guilt, mutilating the genital region of the Blemmye overtly associates their presumed crime with sexuality. This is especially pertinent when considering the offspring of Blemmyes as headless and having monstrous displacement of facial features. Their crime, then, is not just their perceived monstrous bodies; it is the nonnormative offspring that result from their sexual reproduction. Their reproduction as a source of perpetuating somatic differences threatens the stability of the cultural and social identity remaining visibly able-bodied and, in turn, not disabled. Without adequate accommodation, the more disabled persons

¹⁰¹ Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality*, 39.

¹⁰² See O’Brien O’Keeffe “Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England.”

there are, the less able-bodied a society becomes.¹⁰³ It is because the existence of the Blemmye represents a future characterized by the perpetuation of disability that the figurative sterilization of the Blemmye offers comfort to the early medieval reader.

The Staring Dilemma: Blemmye as Looking Back

In addition to the potentially hazardous future their procreation imagines, the Blemmyes threaten viewer's able-bodiedness by staring back.¹⁰⁴ As Garland-Thomson argues, staring is a social interaction that has significant consequences with respect to who stares and who is being stared at; it is an act that relays superiority as the starrer others the staree (the one being looked at) with their gaze. In the Tiberius illustration, the Blemmye provocatively returns a stare to those who would otherwise be an anonymous voyeur to the full-frontal exposure of the Blemmye's body. The same act of staring back can also be seen in the illustration of the Blemmye in the Vitellius manuscript. The Blemmye wears a frown-like expression while directly meeting the gaze of viewers. By staring back in both the Tiberius and Vitellius, the Blemmye consistently defies the role of stareable subject and reverses the dynamic back onto viewers. Those who stare at the Blemmye become the stareable subject in turn, which forces us—the cephalous “normal” viewers—to grapple with our identity.

¹⁰³ For a discussion of deafness and by extension, disability, as a threat to able-bodied nationalism, see Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 73–99.

¹⁰⁴ It is important to acknowledge that not every user of the manuscripts would be entirely able-bodied or without impairment and disability, and the same applies for viewers of today. To actively assume otherwise without acknowledging the presence of potentially disabled viewers would be against the spirit of this project.

Most disability scholars agree that impairment alone is not the root of disability; rather, it is how the impairment is viewed and treated in the cultural and social perspectives and environments surrounding the impairment. Garland-Thomson argues that “people with stareable bodies” expose “collective expectations of who can and should be seen in the public sphere.”¹⁰⁵ For Garland-Thomson, “stareable bodies” are most often those with disability, because their bodily differences become visual disruptions in the “normal” visual *status quo*.¹⁰⁶ These extraordinary bodies compel and attract our vision as sources of intrigue and astonishment.¹⁰⁷ Most relevant to analysis of the Blemmye, though, is a function of staring as laid out by Garland-Thomson:

Staring is a conduit to knowledge. Stares are urgent efforts to make the unknown known, to render legible something that seems at first glance incomprehensible.

In this way, staring becomes a starrer’s quest to know and a staree’s opportunity to be known. Whatever or whomever embodies the unpredictable, strange, or disordered prompts stares and demands putting order to apparent disarray, taming the world with our eyes.¹⁰⁸

The Blemmyes’ absent head and “disordered” bodies defy expectations of orderly bodies and consequently disrupt the visual *status quo* by embodying the unpredictable and strange. As an imagined figure, the Blemmye body is a manifestation of what the early medieval English would *not* expect to see, except within the realm of the perceived

¹⁰⁵ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ See Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 126–157, for further discussion of the looking relationship between the disabled and the “normal.”

¹⁰⁷ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

monstrous East. As “one of the more powerful visual challenges of the *Wonders*,” the Blemmye arrests our gaze and demands attention.¹⁰⁹ The “challenge” arises because, unlike the other Wonders, the Blemmye stares back. The threat of the Blemmye due to their procreative potential, discussed in the previous chapter, compounds itself as the Blemmye directly confronts us with their reciprocal stare. If we are made also the stareable subject, are we not then “unpredictable, strange, or disordered,” much like the Blemmyes themselves? By staring back, the Blemmye unravels understanding of ourselves and our bodies as “normal” and orderly as we take on the role of visual disruption in the Blemmye’s gaze.

Staring is a social relationship with dramatic significance in respect to who is doing the staring; as Garland-Thomson notes, “we enact social hierarchies through visual dominance displays.”¹¹⁰ When we stare, it communicates our bodies as “more normal” than the body we stare at. Moreover, “a harsh stare can do the work of a foot on the neck because the subordinate accedes to the system of domination that is in place.”¹¹¹ Through their perpetual act of staring back, the Blemmye not only unsettles viewers in the ways described above, but ultimately forces viewers to assent submission as we must eventually look away—lest we spend an eternity locked in an everlasting visual show-down. What the early medieval English may have seen as a source of both disability and monstrosity, then, becomes more prominent than the representation of normativity. The Blemmye permanently stands staring while those viewing the manuscript are forced to

¹⁰⁹ Mittman and Kim, “The Exposed Body and the Gendered Blemmye,” 173.

¹¹⁰ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 17.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

look away, reminding viewers of our own mutability, with disability constantly approaching because, as Garland-Thomson reminds us, “we will all become disabled if we live long enough.”¹¹²

Furthermore, the Blemmye confounds viewers’ gender identity because, “regardless of which sex the partners in the exchange identify with, looking masculinizes, [while] being looked at feminizes.”¹¹³ Garland-Thomson reminds audiences of the “male gaze” as discussed in feminist scholarship and argues that, as a result of entrenched patriarchal systems, men often do the staring while women are positioned as the stareable object in a variety of cultural forms. Therefore, by looking at the Blemmye, viewers find themselves in a masculine position with respect to the staring dynamic, as laid out by Garland-Thomson. However, by simultaneously returning the gaze, the Blemmye complicates what would be viewers’ singularly masculine position by feminizing viewers as a stareable object.

The Blemmye’s body already maintains a visibly androgynous exterior through, as discussed by Oswald, the evident absence of genitalia. I would add to Oswald’s point by considering the Blemmyes’ secondary sex characteristics—or lack thereof. Where there would ordinarily be a feminine figure’s breasts, instead, are eyes. The lack of breasts betrays a consistent refusal to acknowledge the Blemmyes as gendered or sexed beings, and, placing eyes where breasts would be expected reconfigures the visual relationship between the Blemmye and the viewer. Putting pupils in place of nipples forces viewers to see the Blemmye’s androgyny as we gaze back at their eyes, and

¹¹² Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 14.

¹¹³ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 41..

consequently their non-extant breasts, even as we acknowledge the notable absence of a penis. Thus, viewers must reckon with the Blemmyes as figures confounding normative markers of identity, particularly markers of gender. Oswald argues, “The possession of these sexed body parts indicates the monster’s potential to reproduce, to do so in human ways, and—perhaps most frightening of all—to do so with a human partner.”¹¹⁴ The lack of secondary sex characteristics not only confounds the Blemmye’s gender identity, but also reveals an anxiety on behalf of the early medieval English towards the relationship between monstrosity, disability, humanity, and possibilities of procreation. By staring back, the Blemmye also forces viewers into a similar gender-flexible position as the Blemmyes themselves. Garland-Thomson claims that “the kind of staring that ‘fixes’ a person in gender, race, disability, class, or sexuality systems is an attempt to control the other.”¹¹⁵ By staring back, the Blemmye keeps us as viewers fixated in their gaze as stareable subjects, and consequently up-ends how we might identify ourselves in disability, sexuality, and gender. With their stare as an open provocation, the Blemmye invites us, tantalizes us to know them as they simultaneously invoke their own quest to know, tame, and control those who look.

The overarching effect of the Blemmye is not just their challenge to gender and sexuality; rather, it is how, as an imagined humanoid figure of disability and perceived monstrosity, the Blemmye confuses and obscures boundaries through which we identify ourselves, *including* gender and sexuality. In this way, the Blemmye serves as a historically situated embodiment of disability itself, a phenomenon that collapses and

¹¹⁴ Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality*, 29.

¹¹⁵ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 43.

entangles the binaries we so heavily rely on for comfort and stability. The intervention of applying contemporary disability theory to the early Middle Ages challenges notions of the Wonders as being “invariably a monster.”¹¹⁶ Instead, this thesis reminds theorists of disability in any historical period that when dealing with imagined monstrous humans as seen in *Wonders of the East*, there is little room for binary definitions of human against monster. Rather, when analyzing representations of the Blemmye, we see a complex dialectic between thematic concerns of monstrosity, disability, and sexuality happening in the early Middle Ages, which anticipates the very contemporary representations of disability we see in such instances as *The New Pope*. Observing these nuances in the representation of disability in the early Middle Ages help us to untangle nuances in the representations of disability right up to the current moment in popular culture. There is more need for nuance in understanding and recognizing medieval monsters as potentially also figures of disability. Medieval texts should therefore be treated with more delicacy, rather than writing off instances of fantastical humans as animalistic and monstrous.

¹¹⁶ Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality*, 52.

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