Reforming Sensory Disability in Early Modern England

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

REFORMING SENSORY DISABILITY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY
MARY LUTZE
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I am truly indebted

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from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever!

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This dissertation engages with early modern literature, disability studies, and Reformation theology. Since its first sustained academic entrance in the mid-1960s, the field of disability studies has developed and divided into a number of separate fields. Disability studies, as a theoretical field, grew out of social activism for those with disabilities; along with this activist motivation, disability studies further purposes awareness and the interrogation of what “normalcy” means. Disability studies as a field is a fairly recent endeavor; in his 2006 work *The Disability Studies Reader*, Lennard J. Davis has argued that the emergence of disability studies occurred in the 1980s. However, other scholars, like Alice Hall, and studies such as *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, trace the academic discourse of disability to roughly the mid-1960s, highlighting “early disability studies text[s]” (Hall 19) such as Erving Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) and Paul Hunt’s *Stigma: The Experience of Disability* (1966). Bound inextricably with social and political activism, the early stages of disability studies sought to advertise the realities faced by the disabled as well as to pass legislation that would remove barriers to the disabled. As disability studies progressed in the late 1980s and 1990s, scholars began to seek alternative ways in which to define and discuss disabilities. Turning away from the already established “medical model in which disability was understood as a deficit residing in the individual” that ought to be cured, various disability scholars proffered instead a social model of disability (Hall 21).¹

¹ From the first attempts to describe disabilities using the medical model, many scholars in disability studies have found it more humanizing to explore disabilities through social or cultural models by analyzing the lived experience of the disabled. It was not until 2005 that the Modern Language Association designated disability studies as a division of study, but preceding this designation, literary scholars of disabilities – such as Felicity
As the field of disability studies has continued to progress, new models with which to discuss disabilities have been proposed – such as the cultural or material model of disabilities, Edward Wheatley’s medieval “religious model” discussed in his 2010 work Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind, or the “interactionist model,” which suggests that “disability is produced through the interaction between individual bodies and social environments” (Hall 27). Additionally, scholarship detailing the evolutions of the field itself has also surfaced. Disabilities historian Paul Longmore, for instance, has introduced what he has termed “waves” of disability studies as a field. The first activist wave gave way to second and third waves of disability studies: that of disability studies as a recognized academic field of discourse – no longer emerging but emerged2 – and that of disability studies as “fissur[ing]” around current sociopolitical and theoretical debates (26). Furthermore, using a broader range of discourse provided by the various new models afforded by disability studies, scholars from various disciplines – such as the humanities – have begun to examine representations of disability within their own field.

Of the most recent emerging fields under the banner of disability studies, early modern disability studies proves instrumental in the conception of this dissertation project. Early modern disability studies is a field that is still emerging; in fact, it was not until 2013 that Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood argued for “early modern disability studies” to be considered a “field of inquiry” (Recovering Disability in Early Modern England 2, 7). In the introduction to Recovering Disability in Early Modern England (2013), Hobgood and Wood give a provocative ethical argument for the necessity of future disability scholarship concerning early modern texts. Specifically, they advise

Nussbaum, Paul Youngquist, and Martha L. Rose – had begun to apply the paradigms of disability studies within their particular areas of inquiry. [The social model of disability – “sometimes called the ‘social-constructionist’ model” – emphasized the public, structural aspects of disability and highlighted the status of people with disabilities as a historically oppressed group” (Hall 21).]

2 Hall records that the president of the Modern Language Association, Michael Bérubé, argued at the 2012 MLA convention “that disability studies could no longer be seen as an emerging field of study” (25).
against the dismissal of disability studies as a legitimate lens with which to examine the early modern period. Hobgood and Wood argue that the “current tendencies to deem the study of Renaissance disability somehow anachronistic…maintain and encourage ableist privilege especially in early modern studies as they dismissively mute—purportedly in the name of ahistoricity—socially responsible dialogue about anti-ableist politics and disability advocacy in both our work and classrooms” (10). For these and other reasons, Hobgood and Wood call for further research in representations of disability in early modern literature, arguing that scholars have not paid due or ethical attention to the representations of disability before us. Indeed, substantial scholarly work on disability representation in early modern texts is glaringly lacking. For instance, of the near 120 entries in the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability’s* “Chronology of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies,” no more than three entries concern explorations of disability in specifically early modern texts; of those three, two sources detail representations of disabilities in just Shakespearean drama. Though certainly the bibliography is not exhaustive, it does suggest the comparatively low percentage of disability studies grounded specially in early modern literature. The final entry of the three early modern secondary texts in the “Chronology” is, in fact, *Recovering Disability*. Within it, Hobgood and Wood declare the intent to “[cement] early modern disability studies as a field of inquiry” (2) due to the fact that disability “continues to be misidentified, or at the very least underexplored, in early modern scholarship” (7). The constructivist models in “New Disability Theory” which extend beyond medical observation to areas of social and cultural response have become the ground which current early modern disability studies have begun to till.

Responding to Hobgood and Wood’s call to action, this dissertation is situated primarily in early modern England and examines the rhetoric used to describe the sensorily impaired in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama, poetry, and circulating philosophical prose. The project

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3 Simply put, an “ableist” perspective would be one that exhibits discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.
hinges upon Edward Wheatley’s proposed religious model of disabilities, which he uses to describe a significant means by which medieval society came to understand the cause of impairments and react to the manifestation of those impairments in those around them by referencing the doctrine of their Catholic faith. The medieval religious model of disabilities can be understood to have been uniform insofar as the ruling religion of the era remained Catholicism; in other words, individuals were expected to conform to the ruling tenets of the one Church and could be punished for publically entertaining heterodox or blasphemous philosophy. In contrast, the discourse of the early modern religious model is marked by dynamism because of the vicissitudes and sectarianism that occurred within the Protestant faith; the Church of England proved unable to contain the fissures in the faith that resulted in numerous denominations and religious sects. My project begins by explaining the ways that early modern English society interpreted impairment first on the basis of Catholicism and then through the doctrinal negotiations that characterize the Reformation. I term this phenomenon an “early modern religious model of disabilities” and argue that it was intrinsically dynamic, mirroring the shape of the Reformation. I chronicle England’s rejection of its prior faith tradition, the doctrinal negotiations within Protestantism, and the ways that depictions of the disabled shifted with religious opinion.

Disability perception altered noticeably from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century as society began to embrace increasingly heterodox and variable interpretations of disability. The multiplicity of religious belief in the sixteenth and seventeenth century was reflected in shifting depictions of the sensorily impaired in literature. While sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society explored and expanded the boundaries on reformed religion, the multiplicity of religious belief in the seventeenth century was reflected in a reformation of the ways society understood and depicted the sensorily impaired. Adapting Wheatley’s own exploration of the medieval religious model of disabilities, I describe four interpretations of the disabled body in the religious practice of medieval
society: as a stimulant for charity, the possible site for miraculous cure, a religious metaphor, and also as a manifested consequence for a sinful lifestyle or the wrath of God. From this, I adapt the medieval religious model and categorize the early modern religious model in terms of its chronology and adaptability: (1) the sixteenth-century religious model of disabilities resembled the medieval by largely expressing a nonnegotiable and uniform interpretation of disabilities as tools for religious metaphor, manifestations of sin, or realizations of divine wrath; (2) the seventeenth-century religious model of disabilities, paralleling the influx of diverse theology that accompanied sectarianism, inevitably began to entertain heterodox interpretations of disabilities and the disabled. Finally, this chronicle of the dynamic early modern religious model, portrayed in early modern literature, culminates with an analysis of seventeenth-century theoretical and pedagogical texts regarding Deaf education because these texts represent a tangible shift in the cultural ideology of the era. Whereas the Deaf and blind had been treated in history and literature as objects of charity, symbolism, or miraculous occurrence and scapegoats for sin or wrath, impaired individuals began to be portrayed as educable, spiritually gifted, and characterized by ingenuity.

This project’s Introduction gives initial description of the early modern religious model of disabilities and how it contrasts with the prior medieval model. Then, with each progressive chapter, I focus on the ways that the drama, poetry, and prose of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England at first bolstered and then ultimately deviated from uniform religious interpretations of disability. The first two body chapters in this project demonstrate through an exploration of primarily sixteenth-century drama how the early modern religious model of disabilities ironically created a societally inhumane response to and understanding of the disabled. The latter two body chapters demonstrate the ways in which transgressive theologians, poets, prose writers, and Deaf education pedagogues and theoreticians of primarily the seventeenth century began to disentangle themselves from the draconian stigmas of disability that had come about largely from a prescriptive
interpretation of Biblical scripture and instead prove a radicalizing humanistic view of disability as a spiritual asset and the disabled as educable, wise, and admirably resourceful.

Chapter Two details how depictions of false sensory impairment in early modern drama, the majority of which were performed in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, worked to reinforce both the understanding of debility in terms of divine punishment, cure, and metaphor as well as to bolster the English Poor Laws, which redeployed the previous tradition of almsgiving to a matter of governmental taxation. The outlooks described in the early modern religious model of disabilities were carried publically onto the early modern stage, were reified through staged representation, and then carried back into social practice. Most importantly, this chapter focuses on the popular trend of depicting feigned impairment onstage and its resulting reinforcement of early modern skepticism and distrust toward the disabled poor.

Chapter Three continues the discussion of early modern drama, focusing again on plays situated in the sixteenth- and early-seventeenth centuries, from 1568-1615. Chapter Three discusses depictions of genuine impairment rather than depictions of false disability. In this chapter, the condition of disability was utilized as a symbolic form of judiciary punishment accompanying an extreme revocation of physical, political, and economic status. Additionally, plays involving mutilation only reinforced the popular religious belief that sensory impairment was a manifested punishment. The condition of poverty often forced upon the maimed characters in these dramas bolsters the previously discussed association of impairment with poverty because their blinding is simultaneously marked by a loss of political power and physical ability. If popular portrayals of feigned disability onstage had worked in the sixteenth century as a means of reinforcing early modern skepticism and distrust toward the disabled poor, depictions of legitimate disability onstage seemed to further dehumanize disability and encourage the mocking and manipulation of it.
Beginning with a discussion of late sixteenth-century popular epic poems that strengthened the societal stigmas that accompanied the early modern religious model, Chapter Four then turns to seventeenth-century contemplative confessional and devotional poetry, closet dramas, and finally private and epistolary prose works. These works demonstrate the first turn away from the negative impact that had come about from the inherited medieval religious model of disabilities, and perhaps suggest the possibilities for improvement in the model through more innovative and countercultural religious interpretations of disability. The authors of the select seventeenth-century works offer explanations of deafness and blindness that encourage the humanizing of the impaired as well as demonstrate an unconventional contemplation of debility as a potential spiritual benefit to the reformed believer.

My analysis of the dynamic early modern religious model as portrayed in the era’s literature, culminates in a final chapter with an analysis of seventeenth-century theoretical and pedagogical texts regarding Deaf education. Chapter Five further demonstrates the ways in which the reformed early modern religious model of disabilities continued to undergo its own metamorphosis through the seventeenth century as famed natural philosophers and educators of the Deaf disproved the stigmas that had prevailed in England as recently as 1615 – primarily the assumption that because the Deaf could not speak and were primarily illiterate, that they must also be ineducable and incapable of basic intelligence, let alone wisdom. Instead, an explosion of publications in the mid- and late-seventeenth century proved the exact opposite: the Deaf could be taught English and in fact demonstrated this capability through public exhibitions of speech. This societal revolution in disability perception also paved the way for the Deaf to be allowed access to salvation through the Protestant Church, when historically and well into the seventeenth century “men borne deaf [had been] excluded from [the] sacrament by the common consent of divines” (Hakewill 120). The treatises on deafness, phonetics, and education by natural philosophers such as William Holder,
John Wallis, John Bulwer, and George Dalgarno represent a tangible shift in the cultural ideology of the period. Whereas the Deaf and blind had been treated in history and literature as symbols, objects of charity or miraculous occurrence, and scapegoats for sin or wrath, impaired individuals began to be portrayed as educable, spiritually gifted, and characterized by their linguistic ingenuity. My project contributes to the burgeoning discourse of early modern disability studies in its proposal for an early modern religious model for disabilities, a new means of understanding the portrayal of the disabled in English literature and society.

As they progress through the forthcoming chapters, readers will recognize the ways in which disability depictions in literature from the sixteenth-/early seventeenth-century and into the latter seventeenth-century underwent a transformation. Whereas the literature of the former chapters demonstrates a strong alignment with the uniform Protestant explanations and expectations for disabilities and the disabled as defined in the early modern religious model of disabilities, the authors of the latter chapters begin to detach themselves from the inflexible stigmas and assumptions that had been intrinsic to the uniformed religious understanding of deafness and blindness in the Established Church of England. Along these lines, the religious dissention characteristic of the seventeenth century, which defied the previous value in the uniformity of religious belief, also became the manner through which transgressive unconventional religious opinions regarding the Deaf and blind began to surface in theological, creative, and theoretical works of the mid- to late-seventeenth century. Although the progression of disability representation was certainly not complete in a modern understanding, the advancement that occurred in the depictions of the Deaf and blind in early modern literature from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century is astounding because it demonstrates a broader cultural metamorphosis from a society at first fully dependent on the church to explain the world to a society that began to undertake its own scientific and philosophical exploration of natural phenomena. This humanistic and scientific development that
focused on humankind as a subject worthy of new scientific and philosophical enquiry in large part transformed the historical understanding and reception of disability and marked the beginning of modern perceptions of deafness and blindness.

**A Note on Terms**

“Deaf” vs. “deaf”:

In accordance with common practice in Deaf and Disability Studies scholarship, using an uppercase “D” in “Deaf” signifies a cultural and linguistic identity marker for individuals who have experienced profound hearing loss. One of the primary markers now for identification in the Deaf community is the use of ASL as a given language. If an individual is referred to as deaf (with a lowercase “d”), it signifies an individual who is physically incapable of hearing, but who does not identify with the Deaf community. Because there wasn’t a universal sign language yet in the early modern era, although records do indicate that deaf individuals in the early modern era did utilize personalized “natural signing,” I use the lowercase to acknowledge this historical disadvantage as well as the distinction between contemporary Deaf culture and historical deaf persons.

“Disabled” vs. “Impaired”:

Scholars in contemporary Disability Studies recognize “disabled” to signify the social and cultural disadvantages caused by a lack of accommodation for individuals with impediments. In Irene Metzler’s *Disability in Medieval Europe*, Metzler utilizes “impairment” because of the “lack of an umbrella term such as ‘disability’ during the medieval period” as well as to distinguish between the medical and social connotations affixed to the terms in Disability Studies scholarship (4). The introduction of the term, “disability,” occurred in the 16th century to denote both a “lack of ability” as well as a “physical or mental condition that
limits a person's movements, senses, or activities” (“disability, n.”). Throughout this study, I utilize cultural and literary examples that suggest a general lack of accommodation, let alone understanding, regarding impairments in the pre-modern world. Because of this, I use the term “disabled” interchangeably with “impaired.”

“Normate”:

I utilize Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s term, “normate,” which she defines as, “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (Extraordinary Bodies 8). Throughout this project, I discuss a societally conceived construction of the “ideal” (and, in an early modern perspective, necessarily unimpaired) body as the “normate” body.
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CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING THE EARLY MODERN RELIGIOUS MODEL OF DISABILITIES

This introduction deals primarily with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theological and sociological questions and surveys the Reformation in all its doctrinal complexity. More specifically, as the introduction progresses, it details representations of sensory impairment in early modern sermons, religious apologetics, and legislation from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, tracing the representation of sensory impairment in reformed theology and the variety of social attitudes toward sensory impairment that existed over both centuries. The introduction will examine the paradoxical Christian tradition of depicting debility as a manifestation of God’s judgment for sin or as an impediment to the fruition of faith while at the same time calling for Christians to respond to the impaired with sympathy, charity, and even admiration. The intent of the chapter is to describe and define a dynamic early modern religious model of disabilities in contrast with a medieval religious model of disabilities; in order to do so, I trace the fluctuations in religious attitudes toward blindness and deafness that indicate how the Reformation altered traditional medieval perceptions of disability.

To date, numerous disability scholars have discussed the reverberations of religious influence over societal perceptions of disability. Especially in time periods significantly marked by the intermingling of religious belief and politics, such as the medieval and early modern eras, scholars have noted the ways that Christian tenets have affected the way that able-bodies members of society interacted with the impaired. In an effort to address the complexity of disability perception, different models of disability perception have been adopted into the terminology used in disability studies.
One notable advancement in the theory and discourse of disability studies has been Edward Wheatley’s “religious model” of disability posited in *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind*, where “citing the Bible, patristic writing, and historical documents, [he] posit[s] a ‘religious’ model of disability that preceded the emerging medical model” (x). As an alternative mode to the medical or cultural models of disability, Wheatley’s religious model emphasizes the magnitude of influence religion has held over interpretations of disability throughout history. Wheatley’s work, which primarily focuses on the medieval era, marks the ways in which religion dictated perception as well as highlights specific Biblical precedent in both the Old and New Testaments for medieval perceptions of impairment. Before Wheatley defined a religious model for disabilities, works such as Irina Metzler’s *Disability in Medieval Europe* or Henri-Jacques Stiker’s *A History of Disability* had also acknowledged the impact of religion on medieval attitudes toward the impaired. These scholars do not stand isolated in this pursuit; in fact, a large number of disability scholars have taken it upon themselves to address the intersection of religion and sociocultural perceptions of impairment across the ages. Taking these critical works as a precedent, Chapter One constructs an early modern religious model of disabilities and surveys a variety of religious texts in order to better assess the ways in which the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and its consequent religious fallouts and schisms affected early modern English perspectives of sensory disability.

Because the early modern era was fraught with religious dissent and fluctuation, the early modern religious model of disabilities is conflicted and in flux. As the religious climate of early

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1 In New Disability Studies, which “makes visible the myriad ways that embodied difference ‘is part of a historically constructed discourse’,” two of the more popular models for disability are the social and cultural models (David qtd. in Hobgood and Wood 5). The social model distinguishes physical impairment from societies’ constructs of “disability,” whereas the cultural model “attends to the ways lived particularity interacts with environment…understanding the meanings and consequences of disability as determined by embodiment’s interface with cultural narratives, language, and representations” (Hobgood and Wood 5). Similar to but a more specific “cultural model” for understanding disabilities, the religious model of disabilities preferences religious ideology and its impact on any individual’s or society’s interpretation of the meaning[s] and origin[s] of disabilities.
modern England shifted, so did society’s portrayals of disabilities and the disabled. The early modern religious model was first characterized by its purposeful deviation from the inherited medieval model even as it ironically mirrored it to some degree. In the literature and society of the Middle Ages, with few exceptions, the disabled body was interpreted in these ways: as a stimulant for charity, an opportunity for miraculous cure, a metaphor for sin in general, and, in its particular form, as symptom of and punishment for sinful acts.² Had the “early modern era” never featured a Reformation of religious beliefs, the medieval religious model of disabilities might never have been challenged by heterodox portrayals of disability and the disabled. However, the Protestant faith began with a schism; for this reason, early modern Catholic propaganda commonly characterized it (many would argue, accurately) as schismatic. England’s divorce from the Catholic faith – the Reformation – begot future nonconformity and schism. Because of this, the early modern religious model of disabilities becomes intrinsically dynamic – as it negotiated, explored, and ultimately accepted religious multiplicity (and diverse interpretations of the nature, cause, and appropriate responses to disability).

The introduction lays the groundwork for the dissertation’s fundamental contention: that the reformed religious model of disability determines the variability in disability representation that occurs in sixteenth and seventeenth century English literature. A description of the religious dissent and nonconformity that occurred throughout the sixteenth century and that finally boiled over in the mid-1600s subtends my analysis of how the early modern religious model of disabilities underwent its own transformation. To begin, I give a brief sketch of the religious journey that England took.

² These categorizations are in large part discussed in Wheatley’s *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind* as he references medieval literature. Though Wheatley argues that the religious model “preceded the emerging medical model,” I posit that the importance of the religious model continued into the early modern era and underwent a doctrinal transformation paralleling the Reformation.
during the Reformation, which buttresses the discussion of the corresponding shifts in disability representation and interpretation. Then I will outline the predominant medieval perceptions of disability and mark the manner in which reformed theology altered them. All of this will accentuate that the early modern religious model of disabilities was first marked in the sixteenth century by a rejection of the medieval model, and then characterized in the seventeenth century by diversity in reformed religious interpretation.

**Religious Reformations in Early Modern England³**

Arguably England’s first divorce from the Catholic Church in roughly 1533 was not done for personal doctrinal disagreement but because of Henry VIII’s own matrimonial objectives and his desire for a male heir. In fact, the initial break from the Catholic Church left traditional ritual largely intact even as monasteries – the symbols of Catholic supremacy and wealth in England – began to be dissolved. Henry VIII’s own preference for the faith of the Catholic Church is made clear by his polemic against Martin Luther, *Defence of the Seven Sacraments*, at which writing he was rewarded with the title “Defender of the Faith” by Pope Leo X in 1521. In 1517, following Luther’s first attack on the problems of the Catholic Church as he saw them, Luther became one of the primary influences on the early English Reformation. After rejecting the authority of the Pope – who had refused to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon – Henry VIII established himself as the head of the Church of England. The church under Henry did undergo some reform, but in large part the Church of England was primarily the same as the Catholic Church in practice. The radical sermon of Hugh Latimer in June 1536, which gave voice to more extreme Protestant views, prompted Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to publish 10 Articles, which was the first attempt at official Anglican doctrine (Duffy 392). These articles revealed several prominent beliefs upheld by the current Church

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³I borrow the plural form of “Reformation” from Christopher Haigh’s *English Reformations*, wherein he argues that England in the early modern era experienced multiple, halting periods of reform.
of England that later became huge points of doctrinal controversy, such as the support for infant baptism, the Real Presence in the Eucharist or belief in Transubstantiation, the support of confession, the use of images in churches as remembrances but not for worship, the continued support of invoking both the Virgin Mary and acknowledged saints, the observance of various rites and ceremonies with the removal of “apotropaic significance” in favor of symbolic significance (Duffy 394), and the encouragement to pray for departed souls. A proclamation from Henry at the end of 1538 still disallowed clerical marriage, on the pain of death, and free discussion of the Sacrament; and in 1539, the passing of Six Articles again affirmed the observance of certain Catholic practices, including the belief in Transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, and confession. A prominent variance that began to differentiate the Church of England from the Catholic Church by 1545 was the incorporation of English as the language of mass as well as the use and mandated display of an English Bible in a translation approved by the king, issued in 1541. William Tyndale, one of the foremost translators of the Bible into English, based the validity of his own translation on its persecution – as he interpreted the hostile response: if the world hates it, it must be of God (The Obedience of a Christian Man).

By the time of Henry’s death in 1547, the Church of England seemed in more ways supportive of traditional Catholic practice than they were opposed; however, with the brief six-year reign of Edward VI (from 1547-1553), the Church of England underwent its most radical transformation during the Reformation. Under Edward’s regency, there was an increased incorporation of Luther’s doctrine, disseminated through later religious figures. Following the succession of Edward, 36 Injunctions were sent to various parts of the kingdom in order to further Protestant Reform. Cranmer published the first edition of The Book of Common Prayer in 1549 and then the even more markedly Protestant second edition in 1552. Indeed, the 1552 Book of Common
Prayer demonstrates a brief forward glance toward the Puritan interpretation of the Eucharist in Chapter Twenty-Nine, Article Seven of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as a partaking “inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually” (*The Confession of Faith of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster* 22).⁴

The reign of Queen Mary (1553-58), Henry VIII’s daughter with Catherine of Aragon, saw the legislation that had furthered Protestantism in England overturned. The Statute of Premunire made by Henry VIII and other laws passed by Edward VI were repealed, and Catholic mass and Latin service were reestablished in England. Although most laws that had supported the schism of England from the Catholic Church were repealed, according to Duffy, “There were in fact many aspects of the Henrician and Edwardine religious changes which the Marian church sought to preserve, from the provision of registers of births, deaths, and marriages, and a church chest, to an emphasis on basic religious instruction in English” (533-34). The Marian program of restoring Catholicism as the religion of England focused doctrinally on Christ and his Passion, “the Creed, the Commandments, the avoidance of the seven deadly sins, the obligations of the seven works of mercy, and the seven sacraments” (Duffy 534). However, Mary’s reign proved even briefer than her younger brother’s, and the Counter-Reformation was not destined to last.

After the Elizabethan Settlement, the Church of England once again became the official church of the state, but the reform of the period did not rival the aggressive legislation that had occurred with Edward VI. This period of the English Reformation demonstrated a tension not only between Protestant and Catholic belief, but also between religious conservatism and radicalism within reformed theology itself. Beginning in 1559, Protestant litany was once again read in English. In 1559, the new *Book of Common Prayer* (also common called *The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth*) was

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⁴ The doctrinal stance on Transubstantiation also reflected more broadly the turn toward emphasizing inward faith and conviction rather than emphasizing an outward demonstration of belief.
published, but the wording of this version seemed to hearken to the 1549 version rather than the more radical 1552 version. With the return of Marian exiles to England, who had fled to the Continent to avoid persecution under the Counterreformation, came a new kind of radical Protestantism steeped in Calvinist dogma.

Dissatisfied by the compromise of faith they saw in England, Antinomians and English Presbyterians – “A radical minority well to the left within the Puritan spectrum” – began to distinguish themselves by their asceticism (Bozeman 11). Experiencing pressure from both conservatives and radicals, Elizabeth took the middle ground. Returning Marian exiles recoiled at the conservative doctrinal legislation passed at the start of Elizabeth’s reign that seemed to take steps backward in favor of conservatism rather than adopting Edward VI’s more radical Protestantism. Puritans seemed to prefer the more radical aspects of Calvin’s doctrine, espoused previously under Edward VI’s reign, which extended beyond Luther and Tyndale in its assertions. Despite this, not all of Calvin’s doctrine was incorporated into the 1559 Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer. In fact, the outlined tenets of the Church of England were not to be altered significantly from 1559 until after the execution of Charles I. Perhaps, as Christopher Haigh claims, Elizabeth wanted as “thoroughgoing” a Reformation during her regency as the returning exiles did (241). However, the council meetings of 1559 established that the Reformation under her reign would be a “half-hearted” or moderate one (Haigh 241). Not radical enough for left-wing Puritans and not staid enough for right-wing conservatives hoping to continue traditional rites and ceremonies, Protestantism during the Elizabeth Settlement seemed designed to pacify, though unsatisfyingly, both polarized religious opinions in its compromise.

Though the faith of the Established Church during Elizabeth’s reign remained largely consistent in its proclaimed doctrine, religious differences during the Elizabethan Settlement were in
fact far from “settled.” A few Presbyterian extremists, namely John Field, Thomas Wilcox, and Thomas Cartwright, were more vocal about the separatism that they believed needed to occur in England. After publicizing their dissent in a 1572 Puritan manifesto, “Admonition to Parliament,” both Field and Wilcox were imprisoned (“Admonition to the Parliament” np). Cartwright, who later sent “A Second Admonition to Parliament,” was “forced to flee England” after its publication (“Admonition to the Parliament” np). Elizabeth, it seems, was determined to maintain the religious uniformity dictated by the Book of Common Prayer and other state-approved liturgy. According to Theodore Dwight Bozeman, “Ecclesiastical radicals intending root-and-branch reform of the church...were social conservatives with no wish to disrupt the existing social or gender hierarchy” (44). In fact, as Bozeman argues, “Foes of Separatism, they taught their charges ‘to seeke the peace of the common wealth...and not to rebell against or revile the governours thereof’” (44). As indicated here, the majority Protestant ethic “in mid-Tudor times reflected a dread of disorder” that was reflected in their general conformity, that resulted in a seeming “indifferen[ce]” and “ambivalen[ce]” or at least a resistance to public revolt (Bozeman 41-43). Certainly stimulated by fears of reprisal and opposed to Separatism or civil rebellion, most Puritan nonconformists largely remained secretive in their dissent.

According to David R. Como and Peter Lake, among others, during the regencies of Elizabeth and James I, most radical dissent or “controversies were generally conducted informally and semiprivately” as English citizens largely conformed to the moderate religious edicts of the State (Como 21). In what Como and Lake term “the puritan underground,” “manuscripts and polemical position papers passed from hand to hand, as disagreeing individuals and factions vied to establish the validity of their respective arguments” and “disagreeing individuals and factions” met informally
to debate differences in religious opinion (Como 21).\(^5\) “These mechanisms,” argues Como, “were in theory designed to allow the spiritually well-endowed to defuse conflict and settle doctrinal disputes quietly and without resort to the distasteful process of official intervention or open, public recrimination” (21). Conversely, it seems that dissenters preferring conservatism or Catholic practice also might have quietly continued observing the most important rituals of their own faith.\(^6\) Agreeing on this point, Haigh also asserts that the “liturgical compromise” that characterized the Church under Elizabeth resulted in resistance that remained largely unvoiced in the public forum (241). Further, Haigh’s claim that the line between Catholicism (with its traditional rites) and Protestantism remained somewhat blurred suggests that early modern individuals who still avowed their Catholic faith might not have felt religious conviction to protest. If priests were able to “counterfeit the mass, to celebrate communion in ways barely distinguishable from the old service, with minimal risk of arrest,” then many Catholics would not have as much incentive to publicly dispute religious reform (Haigh 241-42). Thus, dissent under Elizabeth’s reign seemed largely contained as Puritan nonconformists met in secret to debate the tenets of their faith or resistant Catholics had the tenets of their faith largely addressed in High Church masses. Despite this “semiprivate” dissent, it was vital for the Crown to present the image of a unified religion because it gave the impression of a unified state. Similarly, the representation of a unified religion and state would suggest, misleadingly, that the Crown had finally resolved the instability in sixteenth-century England caused by the rapid

\(^5\) Como also refers to the radical section of Puritans as “the antinomian underground” in Blown by the Spirit.

\(^6\) Christopher Haigh cites the 1578 compiled reports of the church wards of Weaverham in Cheshire as indisputable evidence that the “political Reformation [of 1559] had apparently failed” (251). Aligning in this regard with Haigh, Eamon Duffy argues in The Stripping of the Altars that the English Reformation was marked by a resistance from English citizens who preferred the Catholic faith. Similarly, J. J. Scarisbrick argues within The Reformation and the English People that resistance against the Protestant faith continued to persist; this fact, he argued in 1984, had not been given enough scholarly attention.
successions over eleven years of four different Tudor monarchs with four vastly different ideas of what constituted true religion.

The English Reformation during the reigns of James I and Charles I (1603-1649) was characterized by Sectarian Proliferation reacting against the Elizabethan Settlement. Puritan dissenters, ostensibly no longer quite so concerned about living “peaceable and quiet lives” (William Stoughton qtd. in Bozeman 44), increased in number and variety as various sects began to form in order to provide for themselves in doctrine what the Church of England had apparently failed to do. When James I was first approached in 1603 with the Millenary Petition of Puritan ministers to abolish all the “badges of Popish errors” from the Church of England, James declined, revealing later in the Hampton Court Conference of 1604 that he much preferred conformity among clergy (King James VI and I: Political Writings 7). He reasserted the use of the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer, which showcased a more moderately Protestant position, but allowed for some changes that would veer away from Catholic resonance, such as in the change of terminology from “absolution” to “remission of sins” or from “confirmation” to “laying on of hands.” With the selection of the conservative Richard Bancroft as the new Archbishop of Canterbury, James also signaled his desire for an end to radical reform at that time. However, after Bancroft’s death in 1610, James selected an Archbishop who would turn the mechanism of England’s religion in a different direction. With the selection of George Abbot, who became known as “the Puritan Archbishop,” radical Puritanism and other Reformer reactions to the Elizabethan Settlement continued to develop in full force. The spread of Puritan ideals is demonstrated in part by the content of the 1623 Certain Sermons or Homilies to be read in Church, republished in the final years of James’ reign and first published in its entirety in 1571. The first book of homilies was primarily written by Archbishop Cranmer, who served as a leader of radical Protestant reform under the regency of Edward VI, and
the second book was mainly written by Bishop John Jewel, who largely modified his Puritan leanings in order to conform to Elizabethan reforms.

In 1625, accompanying the succession of Charles I, came an increased pressure towards religious conformity in the clergy. With the selection of Archbishop Laud, the regency of Charles I notably aligned with High Church ritual, ceremonies, and values that would be equated with their most outspoken proponent as High Church “Laudianism.” Against the will of the people, Charles I attempted to institute the more conservative Protestantism espoused during the reign of Elizabeth I, tinged with Arminianism; however, the presence of separatist sects would add fuel to the fire of religious and political discontent. In 1637, only a few years before his own and Charles I’s executions, Archbishop Laud delivered a speech in the Star Chamber outlining the more traditional doctrine that had become almost inextricably linked to what was deemed as “Popery” in the High Church. Generally, Laud’s and Charles’ support for Arminianism, ornate ceremony, and the elevation of altars was antithetical to the wider public insistence on extreme Calvinism, austerity, and anti-materialism. The revolution in England that brought about the execution of Charles I and the Interregnum is “rightly linked in our minds with the strange and dizzying proliferation of sectarian groupings that emerged from the wreckage of episcopacy. Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, Fifth Monarchists, Levellers, and Quakers all appear at least to have evolved out of what might be termed the left-wing of English Protestantism” (Como 12).

The intermingling of religion and politics is seen prominently in the early modern period, and as individuals took religion into their hands, they also demonstrated political discontent more openly. Via mandated reform, monarchs and the English state controlled most of the changes in

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7 I am not alone in situating religious discontent as “the central ideological precipitant” of both regicide of Charles I and the English Civil Wars; David R. Como references Kevin Sharpe, John Morrill, Peter White, and C. Russell among the long list of scholars and historians – including himself – that argue the same (Blown By the Spirit 12).
England’s official religion during the sixteenth century; the number of emerging religious sects (that increased drastically during the seventeenth century) seemed to have been stimulated largely by extreme discontent in a state-driven religion.\textsuperscript{8} At the hands of the state, the authority of first the Catholic and then the Protestant Church was repeatedly disavowed with each succession from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I, which contributed in its own way to fragmentation, dissent, nonconformity, and skepticism.\textsuperscript{9} It is with the Sectarian outburst of the 17th century that the English people took faith into their own hands, even going so far as to leave England in order to practice religion as their convictions dictated.

Despite efforts to settle religious disputes, the theological disagreements that occurred throughout Elizabeth’s reign continued into her successors’ reigns. Protestantism, it seemed, would be fundamentally distinguished by a “structural tendency toward faction, division, and theological fragmentation” (Como 22). After all, the Protestant faith itself had been founded upon a schism; like the stone that causes the first splinter in a glass pane, the initial break with the Catholic faith only effected additional fissuring within Protestantism itself. Despite this, the “tendency [toward fragmentation]…prior to the wars [had] remained subdued and hidden” (Como 22). The full fracturing of the Protestant faith did not occur overtly until the Caroline monarchy. The failure of

\textsuperscript{8} In the research that has arisen in more recent Early Modern scholarship, a theme of debate has concerned the true impetus of the Reformation. Proponents on either side of the issue argue for either a “bottom-up” movement (the general population from the beginning desired the Reformation and pushed for its continued development) or a “top-down” mandate (that the English state forced Protestant belief upon the resistant English people). The former has been the traditionally held belief, and is put forward by scholars like A.G. Dickens; however, such scholars as J.J. Scarisbrick, Eamon Duffy, and Arthur Marotti have more recently proposed the latter.

\textsuperscript{9} As Keith Thomas pinpoints, as early as the mid-seventeenth century religious skepticism and atheism, prompted most likely by prolific division in religious belief, became altogether too common: “The relative freedom of the Interregnum brought much of this endemic skepticism into the open. In 1649 the authors of the Blasphemy Ordinance of that year found it necessary to prescribe punishments for those who denied immortality, cast doubt on the Scriptures, rejected Christ and the Holy Ghost, and even denied that there was a God or that he was almighty” (170).
government censorship and the initiation of a commonwealth in the mid-1600s brought about an explosion of new religious discourse. That discourse produced both fearful and liberating effects. While the Elizabethan and Jacobean church and state seemed to be invested in distinguishing itself irrevocably from Catholicism and keeping religious dissent largely under control, the reformed church during the civil wars was confronted with the task of containing the fractious dissent within Protestantism itself. The emergence of these new reformed discourses, with new assumptions, concerns, and questions, led to ideological shifts in English society. More importantly for this project, it brought about its own reformation of religious explanations for sensory disability in England and culminated with an ideological shift in the mid-seventeenth century: the advent of educating the Deaf.

**Medieval Outlook[s] on Disability and the Early Modern Disabled Body: Metaphor**

From the Middle Ages into the early modern era, and even in contemporary rhetoric, the disabled body in general has been widely used in order to discuss irreverence, ignorance, or lack of faith. This precedent for referring to spiritual faithlessness or hardheartedness in terms of sensory disability has its basis in Christian scripture. Though certainly the original metaphorical statements in religious text might not have carried an intentionally unfavorable statement regarding sensory impairment, the continued usage of the disability metaphor most certainly carried a residual judgment upon the existing impairment itself. In a discussion of the potential for disability not only to be a metaphorical lack of faith, but also for an impairment to be interpreted as a literal

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10 Verses, appearing throughout the Bible and even markedly offered by Christ, declare: “this people’s heart is waxed gross, and [their] ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with [their] eyes, and hear with [their] ears, and should understand with [their] heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed [are] your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear” (Matthew 13:15-16). In like manner, and almost exactly two chapters later, Christ further equates the Pharisees – the understood representations of New Testament spiritual misunderstanding – with the sensorily-disabled: “they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch” (Matthew 15:14).
impediment to faith, Braddock and Parish engage with Stiker in their *Handbook of Disability Studies*. According to Stiker, they relate, “people with disabilities were allowed to otherwise participate in religious observances. The early Christian church, however, held that faith came from hearing (Romans 10:17), and therefore those born deaf were necessarily without faith in the eyes of the [later medieval and early modern] church[es]” (Braddock and Parish 14). Albeit the history of metaphorizing sensory disability in the Christian tradition had its roots in the foundational documents of the faith, its echoes reverberated into the Middle Ages – and, as we’ll find, far beyond.

Certainly during the Middle Ages, disability seemed to operate as a perpetuation of symbolic stereotypes; specifically, deafness and blindness were believed to be connected to specific vices. Blindness, as an example, was often interpreted as the physical consequence for “drunken gluttony and avarice,” which is represented in the mid-thirteenth century play *Le Garçon et l’Aveugle*, addressed by Wheatley in *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind* (2). The text “presents a blind man whom one critic has rightly called drunk, gluttonous, coarse, cynical, and debauched,” a representation seeming to draw upon the understood stereotypical consequences of sin (Wheatley 2-3). During the sixteenth century, this general perception remained largely unchallenged. The dissemination of religious understanding through the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* helped to perpetuate an attitude toward sensory disability equating physical failing, or the failure of physical function, with religious failing. For instance, in the Litany of the 1549 and 1552 editions of the *BCP*, there is a nearly identical petition for individuals to be delivered “From blyndnes of heart, from pryde, vainglory, and Hypocrisy, from envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitablenes” (emphasis mine) – a petition

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11 The real issue at hand for those born blind or deaf was one of language; however, because pedagogy for the sensorily impaired was far from popularized, the consequent lack of education reverberated in other realms.

12 This stereotype would of course apply to individuals who had gone blind; the ramifications of the stereotype would of course reflect on the individual’s personal lifestyle and vices. However, the stereotype – when applied to those born blind – would reflect on the vices of the child’s progenitors.
which would be read aloud by a clerical figure before the whole congregation would participate by entreating, “Good lorde deliver us.” The litany would be spoken in the form of clerical call with congregational response, as directed in the 1559 BCP, in Anglican services on Sundays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and “at other tymes, when it shalbe commanded by the ordinarie.” Furthermore, in the 1559 BCP, “A prayer for trust in God” situates the fall of man as a result of misguided self-confidence rather than dependence upon God. Within the prayer, the petition states, “Graunt vs, that like as we be blind and feeble in deed, so we may take and repute our selues, that we presume not of ourselues, to see to ourselues, but so farre to see, that always wee may haue thee before our eyes, to followe thee, being our guide” (153). In this way, the restorative to religious failure is described as physical sight: to perpetually see God “before our eyes, to followe thee” (153). Thus the language of the liturgy reinforced the metaphorizing of sensory disability and brought a pejorative association between physical blindness and spiritual blindness into early modern society.

The inferences regarding religious understanding and devotion within The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth (the Elizabethan BCP) carried disadvantageous consequences for those born deaf or mute. The accepted liturgy regarding “Private Baptism,” for instance, required the minister to emphasize the importance of both hearing and speech in the furthering of religious understanding and zeal:

that [the child being baptized] may know these thiges the better, ye shal call vpon him to hear sermõs. And chiefly ye shal prouide that he may learned the Crede, the Lordes praiere and the x Commandemêtes in the English tongue, and al other thinges which a Christian mā know, and beleuve to his soules health, and that this child may be virtuously brought vp, to leade a godly, and a christian lyfe. (emphasis mine, 115)

The popularizing of English as the given language of the reformed church exponentially aided the understanding of most laypeople who did not know Latin and therefore might misunderstand the very tenets of their faith. However, the use of spoken English could not assist those born deaf, and
the use of written English was likewise unserviceable for the blind. If the means to salvation depended upon the ability of an individual to “hear sermons” and to pronounce various creeds and scriptures in “the English tongue” – or any tongue – then the consequence of deafness or muteness necessarily created an impediment to salvation.

The notion of sensory ability supporting religious belief is also present in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In his *Institutes*, Calvin describes the “ignorance and sluggishness” of faith as a kind of physical infirmity and later situates the physical impairment with sight or lack of it (1057). His argument is that the physical presentation or “picture…in a graphic bodily form” of the sacraments is God’s manner of accommodating man; because of this, Calvin emphasizes the importance of carnal perception in the participation of the sacraments (1060). “[F]aith leans on the word of God as its proper foundation,” Calvin argues, “and yet when sacraments are added [faith] leans more firmly, as if resting on pillars. Or we may call them [the sacraments] mirrors, in which we may contemplate the riches of the grace which God bestows upon us” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1060). Calvin continues his elevation of the sacraments and how their incorporation enables a sensory experience of religion, an experience which would not be universally accessible to those with sensory disabilities: “For then, as has been said, [God] manifests himself to us in as far as our dulness can enable us to recognise him, and testifies his love and kindness to us more expressly than by word” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1060). Calvin’s description of the sacraments as a visible sign necessarily discounts participation by the blind, for the “faith…[that] leans more firmly” on outward signs would be impossible to experience for such participants. Just as in the consequent inference of the 1559 *BCP*, to those who experience not metaphorical but literal blindness, they are

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13 Most medieval laymen and many priests were notoriously unversed in translating or understanding the Latin spoken in Catholic masses, which rendered medieval mass as inaccessible to the majority of society.
barred from the experiences afforded in the early modern understanding of religious participation. In this way, sensory impairment was truly rendered a matter of religious disability.\textsuperscript{14}

In the \textit{Book of Common Prayer}, Calvin’s own religious considerations, and also in the religious writings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious leaders – such as Bishop John Hooper, John Donne, and John Owen – blindness and deafness were often used as master metaphors to describe various kinds of religious error. For instance, Bishop John Hooper – who held his position as the Bishop of Gloucester and Worcester during the reign of Edward VI – repeatedly referred to sensory impairment as a metaphor for error and ignorance. Interestingly, Hooper’s various writings seems to situate impairment as voluntary disobedience as he describes sinners in two of his “Sermons upon Jonah” as “wilfully blind” (\textit{Writings of Dr. John Hooper} 162, 164). This description carries the weight of further censure because blindness is not only cast as ignorance to religious truth, but it is also understood as a determined participation in sin. Hooper describes these blind sinners as partaking in a cyclical equation: “The blind leadeth the blind into ignorancy” (“An Answer to the Bishop of Winchester’s Book,” \textit{Early Writings of John Hooper}, 174). Hooper also styles individuals who ignore religious truth as those who “turn the deaf ear and will not hear” (“A Declaration of Christ and His Office,” \textit{Writings of Dr. John Hooper} 77). In much the same way as willful blindness, deafness is portrayed as a voluntary religious disobedience in this sermon of Hooper’s.

Hooper’s diatribes become more pointedly vindictive when he not only equates blindness to willful sin but also suggests that the religiously blind are beast-like. To those who don’t understand

\textsuperscript{14} It is problematic, as Tim Vermande argues in “Disability Images and Implications in Calvin,” that “much of Calvin’s language counters ideas of equality. To a degree unprecedented in comparison to Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin freely uses images drawn from disabling conditions” and “Most of these uses are pejorative” (np). Calvin’s metaphorizing of sensory disability – such as likening “an inability to see physically to an inability to see spiritually,” likening blindness to “superstition and obstinancy, which he calls degenerate knowledge,” or likening blindness to the “inability to sense spiritual matters [which] produces distorted desire, which is also ‘blind’” (Vermande np) – only propagates the already popular trend to equate physical impairment with religious failure.
the tenets of the Christian faith, as set forth in Protestant doctrine, Hooper states, “they cannot by their carnal reason comprehend it, \textit{all such be beastly and blind}, and far from the knowledge of the mysteries of our religion, as wherein our senses and reason be by faith condemned and reproved” (emphasis mine, \textit{Early Writings of John Hooper} 220-21). Hooper furthers his pejorative comparison of blindness with bestiality in “A Declaration of the Ten Holy Commandments of Almighty God” and his “Sermons upon Jonah.” In the former, he argues that the “supernatural works” of God in the Old Testament “might have taught the people of those days amendment of life, had they not been blind, as we…that never take profit by any work of God, otherwise than to eat the revenues of the earth, as the brute beasts of the same, nor no more knowledge of God by the motions of the heavens, than the ox or horse, that likewise see them” (418). Those who are blind – i.e., unable to understand or obey God’s will and word – are described further as “brute beasts” who live ignorantly in the understanding of God.\textsuperscript{15} Paralleling the 1559 \textit{Book of Common Prayer}, the symptom of religious failing is symbolically metaphorized as a sensory disability, which was by all rights impossible to counter as early modern theologians discounted the working of miracles in everyday life. If Hooper applied his metaphor of disability to the actual lived experience of an early modern individual, the effect would trap the impaired in a vicious cycle of animalistic ignorance.

The perpetuation of disability as a metaphor for religious failing seen in various sixteenth-century theological works continued to some extent into some seventeenth-century sermons as well. However, at the same time, more seventeenth-century theologians began to present unconventional interpretations of deafness and blindness. John Donne, a seventeenth-century figure most well-known for his metaphysical poetry but who notably was also a publicly religious paragon as the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item It is worth noting that Hooper does not appear to be pointedly attacking sensory disability or those individuals who were born blind or deaf; notwithstanding, the use of disabilities as a metaphor for religious failing implicitly colors the interpretation of disability itself.
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Dean of St. Paul’s from 1621-31, is one such example. For instance, his sermon “Preached at a Christning 1615-1630” describes the Church as a kind of hospital where “the blind might recover sight; that is, Men borne in Paganisme, or Superstition, might see the true God, truly worshipped: and where the lame might be established; that is, those that Halted between two Religions, might be rectified in the truth” (*Fifty Sermons* 37). Though in multiple sermons Donne characterizes disabilities as metaphors for various religious deficiencies that need curing, Jennifer L. Nelson and Bradley S. Berens suggest that some of his sermons might also insinuate a desire for deafness as a spiritual defense against temptation:

> when you come abroad, take heed what you hear; for, certainly, the Devil doth not cast in more snares at the eye of man, than at the ear. Our Savior Christ proposes it as some remedy against mischief, that if the eye offend thee, thou mayst pull it out, and if thy hand or foot offend thee, thou mayst cut if off and thou are safe from that offense. But he does not name nor mention the ear: for, if the ear betray thee, though thou do cut if off, yet thou art open to that way of treason still, still thou canst hear. Where one man libels with the tongue, or hand, a hundred libel with the ear; One man speaks, or writes, but a hundred applaud and countenance a calumny. (qtd. in Nelson and Berens 59)

Nelson and Berens interpret Donne’s anxiety in this passage as a desire for deafness. Though I would not take the inferences in Donne’s sermon to that extreme, it is worth noting that Donne does seem preoccupied with hearing as a potential spiritual impediment. His description starkly contrasts with the outright detrimental understanding of physical hearing as the primary means by which one might be saved, as previously discussed. Donne cautions his congregation to “take heed what you hear,” commenting on the virtue, perhaps, of leaving sense faculties behind in pursuit of more righteous living.

In more than this reading of deafness as a potential spiritual benefit, in other sermons, Donne’s approach to disabilities deviates from the sixteenth-century conventional model. In his “Sermon Preached at Saint Pauls 13. October, 1622,” namely, Donne discusses sensory disability as a literal condition rather than a metaphor. He refers to Christians who “pore upon book, stare upon
preachers, yet…reflect nothing” as more unfortunate than the literal blind or deaf, for “it shall be
easier at the day of Judgement, for the deaf and the blinde that never saw Sacrament, never heard
Sermon, than for us, who have frequented both” (Fifty Sermons 344-45). Unfortunately, the
implication of Donne’s reference still suggests the equation of sensory impairment with ignorance as
well as indicates the apparent lack of religious education for the disabled. The treatment of sensory
disability in Donne’s sermons varies between conventional and unconventional, perhaps because
Donne’s life evenly spanned the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, his sermons indicate
the shifts in disability perception that had begun to emerge in seventeenth-century thought.

Even though John Owen, the bishop of St. Asaph, does not always discuss sensory
impairment in negative terms, his corpus of sermons nevertheless contains multiple instances of
metaphorizing disability. One such example occurs in “Sermon XIV. The sin and judgment of
spiritual barrenness,” wherein Owen details the “particular distempers that rage” in the ungodly:
“darkness, blindness, ignorance, worldly-mindedness, sensuality, hatred of God, envy, and malice,
which are fixed in the souls of men by presumption and self-righteousness. There is nothing in them
of spiritual life or holiness, of purity or zeal, -- nothing that is acceptable or pleasing unto God”
(769). In this passage, blindness is book-ended by the adjectives “darkness” and “ignorance,” a
significant placement for blindness that was more likely than not a metaphorical referent to religious
inexperience or lack of knowledge. However, the distinction of blindness from ignorance and
darkness only seems to cast more criticism upon the physical impairment itself; if it is neither
darkness nor ignorance, what other undesirable vice might it imply? By not only describing physical
blindness as a lack of spiritual sight, but also in specifically referring to blindness in sinners as a

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16 This too is a disability metaphor, although not a sensory one; “barrenness” could be considered a physical
impairment as the physical inability for a woman to conceive.
characteristic of those “wholly carnal and unspiritual” (“Sermon III” 63) and further labeling sinners as “seared, blinded, [and] hardened” (“Sermon XIII” 175), Owen demonstrates that the historical tradition of utilizing sensory disability as a symbol of religious inadequacy and even as an utter lack of religious belief was alive and well far into the seventeenth century.

However, even as Owen seemed to fall prey to the cultural heritage of metaphorizing sensory impairments and equating them with spiritual failing, he also gave several sermons, including “Sermon VI. Isaiah lvi.7” that relegate physical sight to lesser importance than spiritual sight. In this sermon on Isaiah, Owen claims, “All the light the sun can give will not make a blind man see: there must be a visive faculty within as well as light without” before utilizing a metaphor of the body as a building and the “stones” in it as eyes: “The stones of this building are by nature all blind, — yea, darkened, — yea, darkness itself. If the Lord Christ do not, by the mighty efficacy of his Spirit, create a visive power within them, as well as reveal the will of his Father to them, they will never spiritually discern the things of God” (296). Though certainly one could not claim that Owen elevates blindness as a spiritual benefit, as several of his seventeenth-century contemporaries do (authors that I discuss in Chapter Four), he prioritizes the importance of spiritual wholeness over physical wholeness. Owen does not automatically interpret blindness as a consequence of sin or as a visitation of God’s wrath. Owen’s elevation of the inward spirit over the physical state of the body in this sermon points to subtle changes in seventeenth-century ideology that ultimately manifested in reversals of the false assumption that the deaf were incapable of learning and irredeemable because of an inability to hear or read the word of God and respond vocally to it.

**Medieval Outlooks on Disability and the Early Modern Disabled Body: Charity**

In medieval literature and society, the disabled body was interpreted in a variety of ways: as a stimulant for charity, the opportunistic site for miraculous cure, a religious metaphor, and also as a
manifested consequence of the wrath of God. Among the religious responses to disabilities symptomatic of the Middle Ages, one resulted in an active Catholic devotion to charitable giving. However, the variety of medieval outlooks toward disability that early modernists stood to inherit was disrupted and altered by the violent upheaval of the Reformation. Though of course the Reformation did not do away with charity for the poor or disabled altogether, the movement toward legal caretaking of the poor did much to remove the necessity of the middleman. The Protestant faith introduced with the Reformation largely removed the theological potential for an early modern disabled body to be viewed inherently as an object of charity in a system of religious exchange; early modern governmental stipulations for taxation in the form of the English Poor Laws repositioned the caretaking of the poor as a matter of governmental regulation rather than individual responsibility. Similarly, the Reformation revoked the interpretation of a disabled body as a site of miraculous potential in the process of confirming the Catholic faith and its saints. Consequently, the reshaping of this society’s religious practice functioned further as a reduction of the potential explanations of the early modern disabled body from a religious perspective.

Interacting with the work of Gilbert Dagron, Stiker observes the relationship of the able-bodied to the disabled as an “economic system based on gifts” or “a system of exchange”; that is, “The church, rich in its own right…more or less controlled the world of the rich and took charge of the world of the poor: it structured this economic situation and social problem into a system” (73). Lindsey Row-Heyveld further comments upon this relationship in the Middle Ages in her own work in disability studies when she posits that “In part due to the example of Francis of Assisi and the rise of the Franciscans in the thirteenth century…Able-bodied Christians gave [disabled people] alms (sometimes small, individual sums of money; sometimes shelter, medical treatment, or large endowments continuing in annuity) and, in return, experienced an encounter with the divine
facilitated by the disabled person” (“The Lying’st Knave”’ np). Indeed, the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, a religious figure particularly known for devoting his life to help the poor and even modeling what could be seen as a godly practice of purposed poverty, heighten the importance of charitable giving as St. Francis describes the withholding of almsgiving as tantamount to theft. He then reemphasizes the imperative of charity for the sake of one’s soul: “Let us, therefore, have charity and humility and give alms because it washes the stains of our sins from our clothes. For people lose everything they leave behind in this world; but they carry with them the rewards of charity and the alms which they gave, for which they will have a reward and a just retribution from the Lord” (“Letter to the Faithful” np).

In the medieval Church, disabled individuals as objects of charity played a specific role in the working out of one’s salvation; namely, the disabled poor became recipients of charity, through which wealthier medieval individuals could, in a sense, purchase redemption. Because the Catholic worldview emphasized the “working out [of one’s] own salvation with fear and trembling,” able-bodied Catholics during the Middle Ages depended upon objects of charity, in this case the often impotent poor, in order to bring about their own redemption (Philippians 2:12). As Stiker effectively states: “the ongoing discourse of the Middle Ages claimed that the rich assured their salvation by giving alms to the poor and it thus posited the necessity of the poor for such salvation” (74). In this way, as critics such as Henri-Jacques Stiker, Irina Metzler, Edward Wheatley, Ruth Mellinkoff, and Lindsey Row-Heyveld explain, individuals with disabilities served an important role in institutionalized religion. Thus, the giving of charity was one prominent manner of responding and interacting with the disabled in the medieval church. This system of charitable exchange had previously played a prominent role in medieval Catholicism; however, under early modern religious

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17 Through the influence of such religious figures as St. Francis, the practice of asceticism historically has rendered poverty as a somewhat ennobling condition, under certain circumstances.
and political edicts, spontaneous individual charitable exchange began to be phased out of societal practice. The sixteenth century effectively removed the potential for the disabled to serve in any religious system of exchange by – Keith Thomas asserts – relegating religion principally to the arena of “belief” rather than active “practice” in addition to consigning the giving of charity into the arena of governmental policy. Instead of a system of charity dependent upon voluntary donation by observing Catholics, by the seventeenth century, English citizens were taxed to provide mandatory assistance for those in poverty through the English Poor Laws.

Before 1500, charitable assistance “had been provided by a miscellany of means: religious institutions – monasteries, fraternities and gilds; or village and parish resources – town ‘stocks’, almshouses, church collections…After 1530, however, there was increasing government interference, centralization and uniformity” (Slack 6). Vagrancy was strictly forbidden and laws began to be passed requiring “billets” to be worn by the “deserving poor” to give them the only legal means of begging for alms: “the earliest form of poor relief had been to separate the deserving from the undeserving and to give the former a signed and sealed permit to beg for aid from all persons they met” (25). Furthermore, the English state strictly controlled the system by taking charge of assigning merit only to the individuals they deemed worthy of charity, which included the “impotent” or impaired. The qualifying factor for “deserving” charity was an inability to work. Even

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18 This observation, made by Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, is of course factual in theory, but one must also bear in mind that recognition of the godly somewhat depended on observed behavior. However, the removal of imperative force behind the practice of religion is most likely to what Thomas is referring.

19 Those considered “deserving” of charity included the “impotent poor” – generally the blind, crippled, or otherwise physically incapacitated – as well as widows and children. Those considered able-bodied and capable of working were considered the “mighty” or “sturdy” poor and were objects of criticism because of their believed “idlenesse.” For further explanation, see Frank Aydelotte’s *Elizabethan Rogues and Vagabonds*, Vol. 1. Because of the designation for impairment into the category of the “deserving poor,” the discussion of the Poor Laws following applies to the formation of this one societal perception regarding the disabled.
in cases of proven impediment, one would not qualify for charity if they were proven able to labor; in Michael Dalton’s 1618 *The Country Justice*, he states explicitly that one category for the “deserving poor” be “The person naturally disabled, either in wit, or member, as an Ideot, Lunatick, Blinde, Lame, &c. *not being able to worke*” (emphasis mine, qtd. in *Dissembling Disability* 8). Unlicensed begging resulted in severe punishments and relocation to an individual’s place of birth: the Elizabethan law against vagabonds was in place from 1530 and demanded that “All vagabonds and beggars without…licenses, and all persons able to labour, who were found begging, were to be stripped from the waist upward and whipped until bloody, or set in the stocks [for three days and nights]” (Aydelotte 58).

Therefore, though regulation may have attempted to prioritize designating certain poor individuals as “deserving” because of their inability to work, critical judgments nevertheless began to be assigned to poverty in general.

The casting of blame for poverty upon the poor themselves was built into the original proclamations regarding vagrancy, as evidenced in the “Proclamation of Henry VIII Against Vagabonds,” June 1530:

> in all places thorowe out this his realme of Englande, vacabundes and beggars, haue of long tyme encreased and daily dothe encrease in great and excesiue nombres, by the occasyon of ydlenes, mother and roote of all vices: whereby haue insurged and spronge, and dayly insurgeth and springeth contynuall theftes, mourdres, and other sundry haynous offences and great enormities to the high displesure of god, the inquietation and damage of his true and faithfull suiectes, and to the disturbance of the hoole common weale of this his sayd realme. (reproduced in Aydelotte 142-43)

Such royal proclamations declared poverty as a symptom of “ydlenes” and as an impetus for “contynuall theftes, mourdres, and other sundry haynous offences.” With this intrinsic connotation affixed to poverty in general at the onset of the Poor Laws, it is no wonder that future iterations of

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20 Although the blind are listed specifically as among the category of the “impotent poor” meriting licensed begging privileges, the deaf are not listed. It is not out of the question that a poor but able-bodied deaf individual would fall under the category of the “sturdy poor” and would lose privileges to legally ask for alms.
the laws began to designate the titles of “deserving poor.” It is no less surprising that the criticism affixed to poverty only became more severe with the passage of time. Along with the original proclamations against such “ydelnes” leading to poverty and consequently begging, the second book of homilies – *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches*, printed fully in 1571 and written primarily by Bishop John Jewel – also included “An Homily against Idleness,” which pointedly declares, “what shall we need to stand much about the proving of this, that poverty followeth idleness? We have too much experience thereof (the thing is the more to be lamented) in this realm. For a great part of the beggary that is among the poor can be imputed to nothing so much as to idleness” (461). The homily moreover calls idleness “a grievous sin, and also, for the great inconveniences and mischiefs which spring thereof, an intolerable evil” and further exhorts “if we give ourselves to idleness and sloth, to lurking and loitering, to willful wandering, and wasteful spending, never settling ourselves to honest labour, but living like drone bees by the labours of other men, then do we break the Lord’s commandment…and incur the danger of God’s wrath and heavy displeasure, to our endless destruction” (459, 461). In so doing, the author casts idleness as the causing the socially recognized problems detailed in the English Poor Laws, that is, to loitering, begging, and vagrancy. However, perhaps as a means of clarifying the depreciatory connotations affixed to poverty which might reflect unfavorably on the “deserving poor,” the sermon author encourages labor for “every one (except by reason of age, debility of body, or want of health, he be unapt to labour at all)” (460).

The reallocation of charitable giving in the early modern era from religious charity to state mandated support was arguably stimulated by doctrinal reform that removed the necessity of good

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21 “Sloth” has long been understood as a categorical vice among the seven deadly sins; however, in early modern legislation – such as the Henry VIII’s proclamation against Vagabonds – and in early modern sermons, “idleness” is described as a disease infecting early modern society and as the sinful root of purposed poverty.
works as a means of attaining salvation. “Protestant Reformers,” writes Row-Heyveld, “often included personal almsgiving in their denunciation of Catholic excesses, especially almsgiving’s vital role in a theology of salvation contingent upon good works rather than upon sola fide” (Dissembling Disability 6). On the heels of the Reformation, “legislation [in 1536] formally banned almsgiving” perhaps, as Row-Heyveld argues, because “Transferring social aid from the domain of the Church and its parishioners to the domain of the government allowed the crown to control the immense wealth that had previously been governed by the [Catholic] Church” (Dissembling Disability 6). The extreme prohibition of almsgiving did not altogether remove the impulse toward sympathetic charity; however, a societal disinclination for charitable giving was exacerbated by increasingly severe iterations of the English Poor Laws.

The hesitation to give charity made it necessary to enforce “charity” via taxation. In fact, punishments for abstaining from charitable giving ostensibly had to be incorporated into the mandates so that the deserving poor received state-allotted support. Elizabeth’s Act of 1563, for instance, ordered that if “obstinate persons” refused “to extend his or their charity towards the relief of the poor of the parish where he or she inhabiteth and dwelleth,” first said ‘obstinate persons’ would be taken first before the Bishop and if their minds were not changed, they would be bound to appear before the Justices of the Peace (qtd. in Tanner 471-72). If the Justices of the Peace were no less successful, the Act allowed the Justices to assign a weekly taxed amount upon the person(s) according to their own good judgment and that “in default to commit him to prison until payment should be made” (Tanner 472). It was this act of 1563 that made the collection of alms via taxation for the “deserving poor” compulsory when historically charitable giving had once been a matter of

22 It should be noted that the tax, which was enforced at the local level, was still cast as charity on the part of the taxpayer, though its institutionalization perhaps would have rendered the tax as obligatory rather than out of spontaneous good will in the eyes of individuals.
one’s own conscience. Roughly eight years following this act, the circulated Elizabethan book of homilies began to include sermons stressing the importance of active almsgiving via collection. The book of homilies was “Set out by the authoritie of the Queenes Maiestie: and to be read in euery parishe church agreeably” and would serve congregations as a catechistic guide to the tenets of the Church of England. Thus, it can be assumed that the doctrinal teaching within the work was meant as the universally recognized doctrine of the Church of England, approved by Queen Elizabeth herself. In the second book of homilies, a sermon entitled “Alms-Deeds, and Mercifulness toward the Poor and Needy” states explicitly that “such is the slothful sluggishness of our dull nature to that which is good and godly, that we are almost in nothing more negligent and less careful than we are therein [in the ‘works of mercy and pity shewed upon the poor’]” (Jewel 340). The irony of this statement depends upon the recognition of the fact that less than ten years before, strict legislation had been passed to specifically require the collection of alms. Despite these mandates, in the giving of alms, the English people are described as “in nothing more negligent” (Jewel 340). Lacking the intimidation of Purgatory or Hell fire as an incentive to spur the giving of charity, the sermon itself creatively offers material incentives instead: “whoso is liberal to the poor, and relieveth them plenteously, shall notwithstanding have sufficient for himself, and ever-more be without danger of penury and scarcity” (Jewel 341). The author of the sermon, in order to avoid treading into the dangerous waters of espousing Catholic dogma, asserts at length that charitable giving cannot ever be understood as a means of attaining salvation – to consider such “were indeed to deface Christ, and to defraud him of his glory” (Jewel 347). Instead, he situates charitable giving as a sign of Election, “the undoubted children of God appointed to everlasting life” (Jewel 347), which itself could arguably act as another form of religious pressure. The very existence of the sermon on “Alms-Deeds” as well as the careful argument for it in terms of Anglican theology in the second
book itself acts as evidence of a societal tendency to neglect those less fortunate and functions as a corrective to it.

Notwithstanding the ostensible intentions of the sermons on “Alms-Deeds” in the 1571 book of homilies, the continued ratifications of the revised English Poor Law seemed to dissuade any societal enthusiasm for voluntary or spontaneous charitable giving. The vagabond bill of 1572 more strictly enforced the law by adding further policing of vagrancy with stricter punishments against unlicensed beggars. Namely, in addition to being whipped, any unlicensed beggar over the age of fourteen would be “burned through the gristle of the right ear with a hot iron one inch in circumference” for their first offence and sentenced to death as a felon for “wandering, loitering, idling, or begging a second time” if no one offered to “take the culprit to service for two years” (Aydelotte 69). If, however, a beggar committed the same “crime” a third time, “the penalty was death without benefit of clergy” (Aydelotte 69). Echoing the sermon from the second book of homilies, the bill of 1572 furthered the 1563 act, which ironically made philanthropy a compulsory action: the “comprehensive poor law of 1572 went the whole way. Justices of the peace were to take surveys of the poor and then to ‘tax and assess’ all the inhabitants to provide for them, appointing collectors and overseers to handle the money” (Slack 10). One cannot help but read the regulation of 1572 as a final attempt to reverse a widespread lack of charitable giving and the absence of support for the deserving poor – perhaps after the failed attempt to encourage charitable giving from the pulpit. “What remained,” says Slack, “was the need to make [the 1572 law’s] enforcement

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23 Though Slack does not mention the often-faulty system of overseeing and proxy charity, Aydelotte notes the reoccurring failure of secondary agents on behalf of the “deserving poor”: “Lepers and helpless poor were licensed to beg by proxy. The person who acted as agent to go about and receive the alms was called a Proctor…The Proctors were notorious rogues, and instead of being content with their legitimate share of the collections, were commonly supposed to keep almost all they received” (22). Therefore, though a system was set in place to require taxation and aid to the impotent poor (often the disabled poor), the deliverance of such aid could not always be guaranteed.
more practicable, and that was the achievement of the famous statutes of 1598 and 1601 which
defined the Old Poor Law once and for all” (11). The legislation that was further revised in 1598 and
1601 was passed “at a time when the problem of poverty was unusually severe”; namely, as the
population increased, the production of food and the number of employment opportunities were
unable to keep pace (Slack 3). To combat the apparent lack of concern for the poor in the English
public of the sixteenth century, final amendments to the English Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601 were
ratified in 1640 to once and for all recognize “Poor relief…in principle as a public concern” (Tanner
473).

Occurring in tandem with the increasing severity of the English Poor Laws throughout the
sixteenth century circulated the suspicion of feigned disability or “impotence” used in order to glean
some profit from the taxed poor relief. Though in reality, the comparative number of historical
accounts of early modern individuals who actually feigned disability (which is small) stands in stark
contrast with the relative number of fictional accounts of it (Dissembling Disability 3-4), the existence
of its fictional reiterations strongly suggest that early modern society saw fraudulent disability as a
pervasive problem. According to Aydelotte’s chapter on “The Art of Begging,” the proliferation of
beggars and vagabonds was so excessive that in order to glean any amount of charity often
necessitated “some cleverness on their part to make the alms flow, and some trickery to eke them
out” (26). Aydelotte then refers to Thomas Harman’s pamphlet, the Caueat for Commen Cursetors
(1566) as an authority revealing the widespread belief during the early modern era that trickery went
hand-in-hand with the poor who appealed to charity.24 Harman’s pamphlet details twenty-four

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24 As McMullan notes, qua Curtis and Hale, “The large body of pamphlet literature, so rich in detail about
criminal technique, style, and organisation is now viewed as representing ideological statements exemplifying
the process of criminalising the poor, the fears of the ruling class, or a creative literature of dubious
authenticity” (Curtis and Hale qtd. in McMullan 255). A large number of scholars who have published studies
orders of rogues, several of which specifically feigned disabilities or sought relief on behalf of the impaired, including “Fraters, sham proctors, who pretended to be begging for hospitals and lazar houses,” “Abraham Men, pretended mad men,” or “Dommerers, sham deaf mutes” (qtd. in Aydelotte 27). The “Art of Begging” increased distrust of the poor and by all accounts contributed to the diminution of voluntary charitable giving during the sixteenth century. Therefore, while the medieval outlook of the disabled poor saw an opportunity for charitable giving in order to practice Catholic religious principles, the reformation fiction of fraudulent begging, abetted by sixteenth-century governmental regulation, generally contributed to a heightened distrust of the disabled poor.

Even before the Reformation, English citizens began to distrust the poor – lest they become victims of elaborate and single-minded deceit. However, the removal of a Catholic imperative for charitable giving also seemed to remove the burden of religious responsibility from individuals themselves. The heightened distrust of vagrants during the sixteenth century began to hinder charitable giving; furthermore, enforced taxation to allot for the “deserving poor” might have removed the necessity of spontaneous and voluntary almsgiving in the minds of the better off. According to Stiker, the late Middle Ages witnessed a “phenomenon of fear” that, as Lindsey Row-Heyveld furthers, “crested at the beginning of the early modern era” (Stiker 67, “‘The Lying’st Knave’” np). The recurrent refusal of charity apparently stimulated revised iterations of the English Poor Laws to enforce taxation to provide for the impotent poor. By all accounts, this mandatory

regarding the existence of organized vs. individual crime in the early modern era disagree on whether or not English crime in the early modern era was universal and moreover organized. McMullan summarizes earlier historians’ arguments that “a massive criminal conspiracy of large gangs and structured crime networks” was prolific during the period and later historians’ “new quantitative arguments [that] seem to disprove” their predecessors (265). Weighing in himself, McMullan gestures toward human behavior, ostensibly aligning his own assertions with the views of earlier historians: “a criminal underworld was an important feature of the early modern period and crime was organised” (sic. 266). Notwithstanding these varying stances, I focus on the popular early modern belief that such trickery was a common tool of the disingenuous disabled and poor, for the belief itself (regardless of the facticity behind it) is reflected in the popular literary depictions of the disabled poor during the period.
taxation, a secular allocation which took “the form of an authorized and systematic collection of
alms, whereby the impotent poor might be relieved, and sturdy and ‘valiant’ beggars set to
work…was created by the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the consequent cessation of monastic
alms and doles” (Tanner 470). It follows therefore that the first Act of 1536 was “taken in the year
of the dissolution of the smaller monasteries” (Tanner 470). It would be nearly a century before the
Poor Laws functioned with effectiveness in their role of poor relief – serving in more than just the
policing and punishment of vagrancy. Before poor relief was seen as a necessary cause for concern
in its own legislative right, the English Poor Laws only seemed to increase distrust and judgment in
the English public of the sixteenth century through the dissemination of laws which doled out
increasingly severe punishments for vagrancy and unlicensed begging, as well as gave rise to
“discrimination between those deserving and not deserving relief” (Slack 5). As this section has
detailed, throughout the sixteenth century, the government began to play a more prominent role in
policing vagrancy and mandating the compulsory giving of charity. However, because there was no
religious precedent requiring acts of charity as a means of gaining salvation, the receipt of
“voluntary” alms-giving was far from assured. In fact, with the threat of imprisonment by the
Justices of the Peace looming, the ‘voluntary’ giving of charity became an oxymoron.

As English monarchs seized the title of head of the Church of England, even while they held
supremacy over the country, religion was more firmly placed in the hands of the state with
governance through the Catholic hierarchy removed. As previously argued, we can read the
reinforced English Poor Laws as a legislative attempt to maintain control and publically denounce a
cherished tenet of Catholic practice. However, though the Established Church (and consequentially,
the state) seemed to discourage spontaneous acts of charity, minority Puritan dissenters did not. In
fact, according to Bozeman, Puritans, and specifically those of the “Dissenting minority,” were notably addressing systemic poverty by taking matters into their own hands:

Those in city, town, and county communities who struggled to contain the poverty crisis tended to be members of the Dissenting minority within the national church desirous of further reformation. With some frequency, organized and vigorous programs to relieve want and control misbehavior were the work of local notables in partnership with a Puritan clergyman and perhaps backed by the country magistrates. Committed to godly discipline, to work, and to the monogamous and patriarchal family, such figures naturally shared the social anxieties of their time, and they strove for practical solutions. (42)

The impulse to give charitably, which the English Poor Laws ostensibly sought to quench, met resistance from Puritan dissenters. The Christian heritage and insistence on benevolence and mercy was seemingly stymied with the first initial schism from the Catholic Church because the imperative to give charitably had been inextricably linked and insisted upon as a good work, which would help to guarantee salvation. However, through various doctrinal shifts in the Protestant faith and the rise of radical Calvinism, the spirit of benevolence came to the fore again, not as a means of attaining salvation, but instead as arguable proof of Election among Puritan Dissenters. After all, according to the logical trajectory of Calvinist apologetics, only the elect are given the special grace to do good works – and thus good works are an indication of election that God had already foreknown and preordained. For more conservative seventeenth-century Protestants, the impulse for benevolence and mercy may have been met through acts of kindness rather than fiscal support. For instance, many seventeenth-century natural philosophers and theologians – most religiously aligned with the tenets of the Church of England – seemed to have satisfied the moral imperative to give charitably to the disabled poor through efforts to educate the deaf rather than through a spontaneous monetary giving.
Medieval Outlooks on Disability and the Early Modern Disabled Body: Miracle

In addition to serving as an object of charity in a systematic exchange – alms given in exchange for religious benefit or prayer – the disabled body also functioned as a potential site for miraculous cure. This was an expectation not only residing in the minds of the normate population, but as a possibility in the minds of the disabled themselves. For both the impaired and normate early modern population, physical impairments were viewed as an affliction forced upon an otherwise healthy or “normal” body. In the Middle Ages, this otherwise “normal” body could be restored through miraculous cure; however, the reformed church held extreme suspicion for reliquary miracles and went so far as to claim that God had stopped authorizing miracles in roughly the fourth century, “when Rome converted to Christianity” (Levack 40) and that “there [was] now no more need of new miracles” (Hooper qtd. in Levack 41). The potential for miraculous cure was excised almost entirely from the Protestant mindset; however, the curative approach to debility still lingered and eventually was addressed through the development of new science and natural philosophy in the mid-seventeenth century. However, until the time that scientific and philosophical speculation gained ground in early modern England, the residue of this medieval mentality carried through the sixteenth century, manifesting in the tendency to simply consider an individual and his impairment as separated and to interpret the impairment, using principally pejorative terms, as an incurable affliction.

Paralleling the shift in attitude from the Old Testament to New, the Pentateuch’s censures against impairment become baptized into new understanding in the Gospels: “In the New

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25 I utilize Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s term, “normate,” which she defines as, “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (Extraordinary Bodies 8). Here, and throughout this dissertation, I discuss a societally conceived construction of the “ideal” (and, in an early modern perspective, necessarily unimpaired) body as the “normate” body.
Testament, a shift...to healing occurred with regard to physical impairment. Numerous instances of miracle healings by Christ and the apostles testified to this” (Metzler 63). With Christ and the apostles as direct examples, medieval society saw a prominent response to disability as an opportunity to put one’s faith to the test by believing in a supernatural remedy. The preponderance of faith in holy relics and prayer almost served as a guarantee of supernatural healing. A rather comical tale recorded by Jacques de Vitry in the 13th century, and retold by Jan Ulrich Büttner, emphasizes that miraculous cures were often seen as a surefire matter of fact that might threaten the livelihood afforded by the legitimate collection of alms:

Jacques de Vitry tells, already in the first half of the 13th century, of a blind man and a lame man, who meet before a church a procession of St. Martin. Knowing that they would at once be healed when they encountered the body of the saint, the blind man took the lame man on his shoulders to flee more quickly. Because they knew that no one would give them alms anymore when they were healed and they thus would be dependent on the work of their hands. The procession, however, caught up with them, and both were healed against their wills. (emphasis mine, Büttner 9)

On the part of the Church, miraculous cures were used as evidence of the doctrinal sovereignty of the Catholic faith, as a confirmation of the power of religious icons and relics at pilgrimage sites and elsewhere, and as a proof positive in support of a saint-candidate’s canonization. Proving that the power of God was alive and well in His saints was of particular interest in the medieval church and later became a specific argument for the supremacy of Catholicism over Protestantism. Consequently, the process by which a saint became canonized was a stringent process, as Metzler observes in her chapter “Medieval Miracles and Impairment”:

Canonization enquiries tended to follow a set of very specific questions, which included asking personal details of the person who reported a miracle, such as their age, place of origin, what affliction they suffered, how long they had the condition for and interviewing witnesses for the ‘before and after’ condition of the person who had allegedly experienced a thaumaturgic miracle. (128)
Representing Christ in the world, “Medieval saints, as imitators of Christ…transcended nature by working miracles, curing the incurable” (Metzler 183), and because of the necessity of performing curative miracles, the disabled body became an imperative part of the equation. Put another way, the relationship of the medieval Church kept the disabled “tied to—and perhaps working for—the church as the possible source of a cure” (Stumbling Blocks 12). Therefore, according to Wheatley’s observations, miraculous cure carried nothing but positive import on the part of the religious institution, but this system of exchange was less than ideal for the disabled, as continued argumentation will show.

In the absence of any sign of miraculous cure, the disabled body was a testament to insufficient faith. As Wheatley observes, “medieval Christianity held out the possibility of cure through freedom from sin and increased personal faith, whether that of the person with the disability or a miracle worker nearby. And thus…in medieval Christianity, there is a tacit implication that somehow the disabled person himself is to blame for resisting a cure” (Stumbling Blocks 11). A failing of this test of faith recalls the familiar symbolism of the mustard seed, regarding which Christ instructs, “verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you” (Matthew 17:20). Accordingly, the seemingly positive medieval interpretation of the disabled body as a site for miraculous healing also doubled as a test of religious belief. In this way, the negative consequence of such a belief system stamped an impaired individual that remained unhealed as a physical monument of doubt or insufficient faith.

The removal of a religious, charitable system of exchange was not the only effect of the Reformation regarding outlooks of the disabled body. Additionally, the altered doctrine of the Church of England paralleled a changing worldview regarding the veracity of miracles in daily life.
This foundational shift was demonstrated in many articles of faith, such as in the carefully articulated doctrine on transubstantiation that came to emphasize the symbolic presence rather than a miraculous transformation of the elements of the Eucharist into the actual body and blood of Christ.\(^{26}\) This longstanding, traditional interpretation of the Lord’s Supper inherently referenced the Catholic conviction in the continued presence of miracles in the lives of the saints as well as God’s will to mediate power through his human representatives in the clergy.\(^{27}\) It was this belief in the supernatural aspects of Catholic practice that eventually fell victim to the Protestant Reformation. Namely, the advancement of these doctrines demonstrates a transformation of a Catholic worldview that would allow for such miracles as transubstantiation (a worldview incorporating the supernatural into aspects of everyday life) to a Protestant worldview which removed such possibilities, and that – as Keith Thomas describes – relegated religion to the arena of “belief” rather than active “practice.”

As Brian P. Levack describes:

> The Protestant doctrine of the cessation of miracles had its roots in the writings of Luther and Calvin, but it achieved its most sustained and cogent expression in the work of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Protestant theologians. The doctrine was grounded in the belief in the sovereignty of God: that is, the belief that he would not delegate any of his power to a human or supernatural creature. Specifically, it proclaimed that although God had performed miracles in biblical times to strengthen and confirm the people’s faith in Christ and had given the power to his Apostles to continue the work of converting pagans to Christianity, this authorization ended no later than the fourth century, when Rome converted to Christianity. Bishop John Hooper…wrote in 1550 that the

\(^{26}\) Transubstantiation was the Roman Catholic Church’s stance concerning the Eucharist. Specifically, transubstantiation was the belief that the elements of the sacrament underwent a physical transformation during the ceremony – that the substances, the bread and wine, changed form into the actual body and blood of Christ.

\(^{27}\) A letter to the Romans by Saint Ignatius of Antioch, written in roughly 106 AD, enunciated the commonly-held Catholic interpretation of the elements of communion: “I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham; and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.” This literalizing of the elements was then reaffirmed using the term “transubstantiate” by the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215 (The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215).
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cles of the early Church had been so successful in proving the truth of Scripture that “there is now no more need of new miracles.” (40-41)

The removal of the Catholic miracle in the host was the rewriting of a worldview, and it paralleled the removal of other medieval beliefs that had carried on for some time into the early modern era (such as a cosmological understanding of the natural world). The belief that supernatural power was physically evident in everyday life – a belief that had governed most of Christian history and into English medieval church practice – began to be rewritten; furthermore, the ways in which the interpretation of the sacrament of the Eucharist was only one example of that transformation. Not perhaps planning on the denial of God’s omnipotence, Protestants nevertheless undercut the long-held position of their ancestors: that daily life was saturated with the physical evidence of God’s power.

Contemporaries espousing the Protestant faith viewed many of the ceremonies and practices of the Catholic Church as no more than “Catholic magic” and thus miracles began to be viewed as another form of Catholic deception (Thomas 53). Indeed, according to John Calvin, the very consecration of the elements of the host during the Eucharist was subterfuge and a “challenge to God’s omnipotence” (Thomas 52): “[Papists] pretend there is a magical force in the sacraments, independent of efficacious faith” (Calvin qtd. in Thomas 53). A seventeenth-century clergyman, John Owen, demonstrates the denunciation – or at the least, devaluation – of the working of miracles by early modern Protestants in his “Sermon IX. Of walking humbly with God.” Owen dismisses the hypothesis that Christ meant for people to imitate him in his miracle working: “What shall we learn of him? what doth he propose to our imitation? — that we should work miracles? walk on the sea? open blind eyes? raise the dead? speak as never man spake? ‘No,’ saith he; ‘this is not your concernment’ (126). Rather than elevate the miraculous at work, Reformers instead focused on the elevation of faith and not practice.
Martin Luther’s introduction to the 1528 edition of an anonymous polemic against vagrancy, the *Liber Vagatorum*, as Row-Heyveld indicates, suggests an intermingling of the fears of deception by disabled persons and of religious institutions. “As Luther's presence in this literature attests, fear of deception by disabled persons was intimately linked to fears of religious deception, a connection capitalized upon by the emerging Protestant majority,” says Row-Heyveld (“The Lying’est Knave” np). The dissolution of monasteries acted as a deterrent to not only the giving of charity or the wandering of individuals on pilgrimages, but also played a part in removing the possibility of miraculous testimonies because it removed one of the primary locations wherein such events took place. Row-Heyveld notes, “The repudiation of such practices merged with Protestants' extreme suspicion of miracles, exemplified by their interpretation of the Eucharist as a symbolic and not literal act of divine communion…The early Protestants capitalized upon and expanded the fear of disabled persons, adding religious fervor to pre-existing paranoia” (“The Lying’est Knave” np). The direct application of this paranoia is noted in E. Pearlman’s analysis of John Foxe’s account of the miraculous healing of a blind beggar at St. Albans. The account of the blind beggar at St. Albans details the false tale of a healing by a man who claimed to be blind from birth and was miraculously cured while on pilgrimage. The falsity of the testimony is uncovered by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester after the blind man not only is able to note the different colors around him but also distinguish them by name – an impossible feat for one claiming blindness from birth. The tale is retold in several early modern texts, as Row-Heyveld’s study elucidates. Regarding Foxe’s account of the false miracle, it is noted that “Foxe viewed the ‘miracle’ as an example of popish superstition and the Duke as a type of pre-Reformation Protestant hero worthy of his place in the book of martyrs” (qtd.in “The Lying’est Knave” np).
As has been suggested, the rejection of the possibility for miracles held direct implications regarding the perceptions of early modern disabilities. Keith Thomas claims that the Protestant Reformation undercut Catholic belief and practice, “By depreciating the miracle-working aspect of religion and elevating the importance of the individual’s faith in God,” “a new concept of religion itself” as “belief” began to be elevated above “practice” (76). Whereas medieval notions of disabilities fully supported miraculous healing and even used such events as proof for saintly canonization, the early modern Church of England began to deny the existence of miracles and thus removed the hope for any such miraculous occurrence. Far from being viewed as a potential site for miraculous healing and testimony of God’s continuing presence in daily life, for the conforming Protestant, the disabled body more often became a site of suspicion connected with Catholic subterfuge.

Despite the repudiation of miraculous cure as a feasible response to impairment during the sixteenth century, the clinical view of disabilities – as conditions that individuals should automatically seek to cure – continued to persist in efforts to “cure” muteness (caused by congenital deafness) through speech education in the seventeenth century. According to Mitchell and Snyder in Narrative Prosthesis, the medical approach to disability in the early modern era is best described as a “‘cure or kill’ phenomenon: that “disability must be either rehabilitated or expunged” and that this perspective “medicalizes disability…[in] an essentialist discourse that treats variation as pathology” (qtd. in Recovering Disability 13). The particular “rehabilitation” for the Deaf that became popular in seventeenth century England was the acquisition of spoken and written English in an effort to “cure or kill” muteness and the use of natural signing.28 Though Deaf education began and gained ground

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28 This approach by the majority could be seen as a pathologic effort aligned with the medical model of disabilities, there were some seventeenth-century theorists – such as John Bulwer or Anton Deusing – whose
in Spain from roughly the mid-sixteenth century onwards, the formal education of the deaf in England was not undertaken for almost another century. One cannot help but wonder if the disruption caused by the Reformation in England also disrupted whatever progress might have occurred in deaf education under the influence of fellow Catholic clergy. Might a similar story have occurred in England in the sixteenth century as well, with members of the Catholic clergy fearful for the fate of their deaf congregants’ souls, had the Catholic Church continued in prominence in England? As fate would have it, the Reformation split England’s prior unity with the Catholic faith in the mid-1530s, and this schism sent consequent tremors of change into every aspect of life, even impacting perceptions of the hearing and seeing impaired. Thus, the development of education for the deaf in seventeenth-century England stands in stark contrast with the original motivations of its Spanish progenitor. Rather than ultimately seeking a means for the deaf to have access to their Catholic faith, in Protestant England, the primary educators of the hearing impaired in England approached their deaf pupils pathologically, concerned primarily with “curing” muteness with spoken and written English.

After the Reformation and in an age where reformed clergymen denied the existence of miracles, Protestant society could no longer rely on supernatural power to cure debility. Nevertheless, they still interpreted impairments as inherently unnatural, something to be “fixed.” In her book *Benedictine Roots in the Development of Deaf Education: Listening with the Heart*, Marilyn Daniels attributes the progress in Deaf education directly to a philosophical shift that occurred during the Renaissance:

> During the Renaissance, two significant components came together to create an environment where the concept of deaf education could be examined. First, throughout the earlier medieval world, God had been the center of all scholarly endeavor. Now humankind approaches regarding semantics, sign language, and the deaf were more holistic. I discuss this with more detail in Chapter Five.
became the focus as intellectual activity shifted from God to human beings. Second, inductive scientific theory began to be accepted in place of Aristotelian deductive reasoning. When these two drives merged, they ushered in a scientific era where new answers were found for old questions and the erroneous convictions from the ancient world were actively exposed. (4)

As Daniels describes, the newfound focus for “intellectual activity” (humankind) was coupled with the development of a new scientific theory. Because of this, David Cram and Jaap Maat recognize that “In seventeenth-century philosophy, the link between language, knowledge, and the lack of sight or hearing was a recurrent theme. The situation of the deaf and dumb was used to support a range of philosophical claims” (Teaching Language 4). In large part, advocates of new philosophy were predominantly responsible for the progression of Deaf Education in seventeenth-century England, and the root of their compulsion was grounded in their efforts to “cure” muteness through the systematic study of linguistics and practice of phonetic instruction. In this way, the seventeenth-century instruction of the deaf, in the Protestant mindset, offered an educational alternative to the previously espoused Catholic dependence on miraculous cure.

**Medieval Outlooks on Disability and the Early Modern Disabled Body:**

**Crime and Punishment**

The outlook of the disabled body as a manifestation of God’s wrath has been the most nefarious and perhaps most frequently-cited medieval outlook on disability. Arguably the majority of scholarship over time has furthered the notion that medieval society perceived of disabilities as a direct manifestation or consequence of sin. The medieval outlook described by scholars on this end of the spectrum formulates a paradigm for medieval perspectives on disability from the Old Testament doctrine that would have functioned foundationally in Christian belief. Incorporated into the interpretation of disabilities as a sign for sin or God’s wrath was the historical principle of physiognomy, or “The concept of a mutual influence or link between body and soul...As a ‘science’, 
physiognomy has antecedents in classical antiquity, where the character of a person and their physical appearance was \[sic\] seen to be connected” (Metzler 54). This system based upon the correspondence of physical appearances and their metaphysical signification was part and parcel of the broader topos of cosmological belief. According to Isabel Rivers, “The traditional cosmology provided a coherent account of the constitution of all existing things and the relationship between them, from the great cosmos or macrocosm, the universe, to the small cosmos or microcosm, man” (68). As Metzler further notes, “The popularity of physiognomics, growing through the later Middle Ages, actually peaked in the sixteenth century” (54). However, in more than the practice of medicine, physiognomy also had the potential of religious reverberation. One could make spiritual connections based on appearance as “the outward Signature or impression which…shews …inward Virtue” (Edwards qtd. in Harrison 193). Similarly, the medieval disabled body could be interpreted, using physiognomic principles, as a physical manifestation of a corrupt or deformed soul.

Though it materialized in medieval documents and artwork, the understanding of disabilities as a consequence for sin extended much deeper into the history of religious belief. Passages referring to the existence of impairment in terms of direct causation occur repeatedly in the Old Testament. For example, in Exodus 4:11, wherein Moses attempts to sidestep his role as the liberator of the Jewish nation from their slavery in Egypt by referring to his own stutter, God responds with a

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29 Physiognomy continued to remain popular in the early modern period; at the same time, the practice also began to be labeled as another kind of “subtile, crafty and unlawful [game]” by figures such as Henry VIII, whose statute of 1530 threatened corporeal punishment and banishment to those “beggars or vagabonds” who practiced such “physnomye or palmestrye” (22 Henry VIII, chapter 12, section 4). Therefore, though the belief persisted (even reaching its peak of popularity in the sixteenth century as Metzler claims), the belief and practice of physiognomy also began to see pushback in the early modern era, in more than just legislation. In religious terms, the nature of physiognomy’s individualized focus (attributing one person’s facial features or figure with personalized faults) seemed to run contrary to the generalized emphasis on universal falleness, an emphasis intrinsic with emerging Protestant doctrine. It should be understood, however, that the existence of one does not necessarily negate the other; the understanding of impairment as the manifestation of God’s wrath for sin (a kind of physiognomic explanation) certainly persisted in the early modern era, but the impetus was considered a universal condition of depravity rather than an individualized fault.
statement that by all accounts situates the existence of disabilities as divinely directed: “The LORD said to him, ‘Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?’” Elsewhere in the Pentateuch, disability is described specifically as a fitting punishment for disobedience, such as in Deuteronomy: “The LORD will smite you with madness and with blindness and with bewilderment of heart” (Deuteronomy 28:28). In addition to that quoted above, another notable passage regarding the stimulus for disabilities occurs in Deuteronomy 28, wherein the failure to “hearken unto the voice of the LORD” carries the curse that “The LORD shall smite thee with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of heart: And thou shalt grope at noonday, as the blind gropeth in darkness, and thou shalt not prosper in thy ways: and thou shalt be only oppressed and spoiled evermore, and no man shall save thee” (KJV, 28-29). In this instance, disabilities are described specifically as a direct result of sinful disregard of God’s mandates, and such passages helped to perpetuate the all-too-common Christian belief in disabilities as manifest evidence for disobedience of the divine. Another prominent example details heavenly directives regarding priests of Aaron’s lineage and permission to offer sacrifices and approach the Holy of Holies in Leviticus, chapter twenty-one:

> Whosoever he be of thy seed in their generations that hath any blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God. For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous, Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded, Or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken; No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the LORD made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God…that he profane not my sanctuaries. (Leviticus 21: 17-23)

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30 One might posit that this declaration by God suggests that in certain cases, the existence of a disability makes no difference in terms of worth or the ability to serve God; especially given that as the narrative progresses, Moses still becomes the mouthpiece of God despite his apparent speech impediment. I do not stand opposed to this tangential reading; notwithstanding, in this reference, I mean to emphasize the fact that God’s speech indicates that the existence of disabilities is purposed. It is this fact that helps stimulate such notions of disabilities as a God-given punishment for sin.
In this passage, blindness is included among a list of non-normate physical impairments ("blemish[es]”) as something that would “profane...sanctuaries”; scriptural quotations such as these only emphasized the pejorative perceptions of impairment. This passage, joined by several others, helped to form the conception of disabilities as divinely sanctioned, a conception that continued forward into the Middle Ages.

Utilizing Biblical precedent such as the passages quoted above, A. Ohry and E. Doley describe their own research as revealing “that disabilities are presented as divine punishment for human misdeeds, while compliance with the religious and moral laws will improve or heal physical handicaps” (qtd. in Metzler 39). Furthermore, in line with a more extremist interpretation of this phenomenon, Deborah Marks argues, “In the Middle Ages, disabled people were subjected to a host of superstitious ideas, which led to their persecution. Impairment was believed to be the result of divine judgment and therefore a punishment for sin. Abuse of disabled people was sanctioned by the church…[and] disability was associated with evil and witchcraft” (28). George Henderson and Willie V. Bryan posit the historical tradition of interpreting both mental and physical disability “as the work of evil mana [sic.,] or spirits” (qtd. in Metzler 13). The consequences of such a view, as they claim, were that “If, after considerable coaxing, the spirits did not leave a possessed body, this was believed to be indisputable evidence that the individual was being punished”; to avoid the dissemination of such contamination, Henderson and Bryan state that the disabled individuals believed to be possessed were either “avoided or killed” (qtd. in Metzler 13). The number of works furthering this claim is ponderous, which suggests the merits behind the claim; furthermore, their

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31 Although Henderson and Bryan’s work touches upon trans-temporal psychosocial interpretations of disability, this section concerns “Ancient Beliefs and Practices” and more specifically the “religious beliefs and practices of primitive societies” (qtd. in Metzler 13).
sheer magnitude certainly checks a hasty dismissal of what might otherwise seem a reduction of the issue’s complexity.

While one side of the spectrum argues that medieval perspectives drew a direct correlation between sin and disability, on the other scholars deny the universality of this perspective in medieval ideology or at the least seek to complicate what they see as monochromatic observation. Representing such a position is Irina Metzler, who stands opposed to the “belief of modern authors that ancient or medieval societies invariably saw a link between sin and illness” (original emphasis, 13). Indeed, surveying numerous examples from varying disciplines and decades of scholarship, Metzler dismisses their findings one by one as “misconceptions,” “misinterpret[ations],” “oversimplif[ications],” and hasty “generaliz[ations]” of both the medieval time period and of the Bible (43). However, in her chapter regarding the impact of religion on medieval attitudes toward the impaired, Metzler gives some latitude in her argument, noting that “For Western medieval Europe, notions of both impairment and disability would be impossible to explain without reference…to the Church, charity, miracle healings, punishment or sin” (26). Along these lines, Joshua Eyler suggests, “While it is certainly accurate to say that some people in the Middle Ages believed disability to be God’s punishment for sin, this way of understanding medieval disability has only a limited viability. In truth, there were many lenses through which medieval societies viewed disability” (3). And certainly this more moderate position regarding medieval outlooks on disability boasts a multitude of voices, including Henri-Jacques Stiker, Edward Wheatley, David L. Braddock, and Susan L. Parish.

Referencing the outright paradoxical nature of Biblical representations of disability, scholars attest that the variability of response in Christian scripture parallels the variable responses of medieval society. In other words, the explanation for disabilities, and the reception of disabilities
during this time frame allowed for the complexity that the issue demands. Braddock and Parish state for instance that “Writings from the Old Testament suggest paradoxical attitudes, which exhorted society to be generous and kind toward individuals with impairments, while also declaring that impairment was a mark of the wrath of God” (17). Stiker summarizes medieval Christianity as never having “found an entirely stable position, nor an effective praxis to address disability” (87). Furthermore, addressing the periods of the Middle Ages as having perpetuated their own individual responses to disabilities, Stiker emphasizes that the “phenomenon of fear” was “fundamental to the end of the Middle Ages” (67). He notes more generally that disability was perceived in a multitude of ways: “God sends us disease and disability as trials on the one hand, as opportunities to exercise our greatest virtue, charity, on the other, and thirdly as the sign of his presence” (Stiker 87). In large part agreeing with the approach to medieval disabilities that suggests a complex stratum of responses, Wheatley posits the existence of a more positive narrative tracing through literature of the Middle Ages – referencing the Catholic practice of charitable giving and the disabled body as a potent site for miraculous cure; however, he does not deny that “some of the church’s practices were actively discriminatory against people with impairments” (Stumbling Blocks 19). Moreover, establishing his argument in “Monsters, Saints, and Sinners” on the foundational understanding that the medieval belief in the correlation between sin and disability did in fact exist, Wheatley states that though “Miracles of cure greatly outnumber miracles of chastisement in medieval hagiographies… nevertheless the association of sin with disability in the latter category must have raised doubts in people’s minds about why or how other people became disabled” (19). Thus the literature of the period, analyzed through these noteworthy scholars of medieval disability studies, presents a complex tale of the interpretation of disabilities.
With the introduction of Reformation theology that ran against Catholic dogma, whole societies changed, and with the reforming of society came the implications of altered perceptions towards such realities as sensory [dis]ability. As has been discussed, medieval perceptions toward sensory disabilities, such as blindness, were attributed the direct causation of sinfulness. Certainly the medieval outlook would not deny a postlapsarian state of universal fallenness; in fact, under the paradigm of St. Augustine (which was also embraced by the reformed Church), the impaired were recognized as one aspect of diverse humanity. Within Augustine's theology, the disabled person becomes “Someone to stimulate charity since he is part of creation and is no longer intrinsically associated with sin, fault, culpability, or with the anger of the gods, or with nonintegrable difference” (Stiker 77). However, at the same time, accounts of disability during the Middle Ages also markedly imply personal failure as the trigger for disability. This is seen in such accounts as Le Garçon et l’Aveugle, wherein the blind man is presented as “drunk, gluttonous, coarse, cynical, and debauched” (Stumbling Blocks 2-3); in these cases, an individual’s impairments or “blemish[es]” become outward reflections of an inward immorality. The early modern perception of disability as a result of sin still appears in extant religious texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. However, in contrast to medieval viewpoints, Protestant discourse predominantly points to the universal fallenness of mankind rather than emphasizing any one individual’s own personal religious transgressions. Indeed, reformed theology stressed the reality of mankind’s shared state of sinfulness, in large part excising the individualized blame attributed to the existence of impairment.

In early modern Protestant discourse, disabilities, illness, suffering, and other shortcomings were all described as consequences of the primal Fall and were no longer considered widely as punishments for individual, familial, or inherited sins. P. K. Longmore, in “Uncovering the Hidden History of People with Disabilities,” notes, “It seems likely that in western societies, until the early
In the modern era, disability was viewed as an immutable condition caused by supernatural agency” (emphasis mine, 355). Furthermore, as Metzler describes, “Theologically, all human ills were caused by sin, due to the primeval Fall from grace, so that all illnesses, without any hierarchical qualifications, were in a very wide sense due to sin” (Metzler 63). In the introduction to Stiker’s *History of Disability*, Mitchell describes Stiker’s arguments regarding the religious approaches to sin and impairment in the following way: in his observation, the necessity of men to appear before God “without blemish” is attributed to the traditional view of God as perfectly holy, and the fact that men cannot naturally be seen likewise as holy is a result of the “inherent imperfection of the human condition,” writ large (Mitchell, “Foreword” x). The observation regarding religious thought in the Western tradition, at length, is as follows: “Since that which God possesses must be, by definition, without blemish, disabilities made literal the evidence of the inherent imperfection of the human condition. Within this formulation disabilities resulted in social ostracization and in a tradition of representation that deploys disability as the master metaphor for humanity’s essential corruption since the Fall” (Mitchell, “Foreword” x). The Protestant emphasis on universal fallenness and the fallen state of the postlapsarian body creates a kind of nullification of the idea that disability was the result of individual sin.

Although under the Protestant paradigm, disability could still be interpreted as resulting from sin, it was seen more broadly as a universal sin and not particularly an individual one.  

Calvin, in emphasizing what he terms a mistake in religious belief, reiterates medieval arguments regarding the topic of Original Sin:

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32 As a side note, Luther’s suggestion of physical demonic possession also did not incorporate the idea of personal spiritual depravity or the loss of one’s salvation. He made a distinction between the physical world and the spiritual one (which is a pretty general Protestant view, as we can see in the distinction that marks the physical representation of a sacrament and its spiritual symbolism).
The subject gave rise to much discussion, there being nothing more remote from common apprehension, than that the fault of one should render all guilty, and so become a common sin. This seems to be the reason why the oldest doctors of the church glance obscurely at the point, or, at least, do not explain it so clearly as it required. This timidity, however, could not prevent the rise of a Pelagius with his profane fiction—*that Adam sinned only to his own hurt, but did no hurt to his posterity.* Satan, by thus craftily hiding the disease, tried to render it incurable. (emphasis mine, *Institutes* 214)

The “profane fiction” of early church fathers allowed for the belief that individuals were not born inherently depraved, but that imitation of sin – the acting out of sin – was learned behavior. As Calvin states, “it passed by imitation, and not by propagation” (*Institutes* 214-215). On the one hand, the belief of soul formation as *ex nihilo* rather than *ex traduce* removes individual blame in that “the soul is not related in substance to the flesh it inhabits” (Targoff 11), and in that way, an impaired body would not reflect some impairment in the soul. On the other hand, the implications of the “profane fiction” of learned sin rather than inherited sin, might have ironically contributed to one reading of non-congenital disability as an individually sourced punishment. For those individuals who developed disabilities with age, it was understood as more likely a result of a sinful lifestyle.

Under this paradigm, a paradox emerges regarding individuals born with disabilities, for whereas the doctrine of acquired sin did not allow for hereditary sin, a commonly held belief – as previously stated – was that of generational retribution. Therefore in the Middle Ages, the oxymoronical conceptions of disabilities as a consequence of generational sin and the belief in the impossibility of inherited sin existed in the same domain. However, Calvin’s argument for universal inherent depravity – “We thus see that the impurity of parents is transmitted to their children, so that all, without exception, are originally depraved” – removed the paradox and ostensibly attributed such physical consequences of sin as a general consequence of the Fall (215). Though Calvin’s

33 Not all early church fathers held this view: “The orthodoxy, therefore, and more especially Augustine, laboured to show, that we are not corrupted by acquired wickedness, but bring an innate corruption from the very womb” (*Institutes* 215). The variety of doctrinal belief witnessed here supports the variety of apparently contradictory readings of disability during the Middle Ages.
statement speaks of the inheritance of a generalized sinful state, there were nevertheless those in
the early modern era who espoused belief that the specific sins of one’s parents could produce a
particular debilitating consequence. For instance, the seventeenth-century English physician and
natural philosopher, John Bulwer, reports in his chapter on the causes of natural deafness in his
1648 text *Philocophus; or, The Deafe and Dumbe Mans Friend*, that

> Sometimes the sinne of the Parents are exemplarily punished in their children. Dr. Joachim
> the brother of Camerarius, told him he saw in the Court of the Lantgrave of Hesse, a Boy
deafe and dumbe so witty, that hee could not wonder enough at his dexterity in executing the
> commandements that were given him…[the boy’s] mother being accused of stealing when
> she went with childe with him, used such an imprecation, that if that which she was charged
> with was true, her Childe might enver speake when it came to be in the World, but remained
> Dumbe all his life. (77-78, original emphasis)

Interestingly enough, Bulwer’s statement identifies inherited punishment as a potential cause for
deafness rather than the individual sins of the deaf themselves. Therefore, though this passage
certainly demonstrates the still-extant belief in individualized sin resulting in physical consequences
(and especially sensory impairments), it also remains one step removed from laying the blame at the
feet of the impaired themselves. At this juncture, it is important to clarify that Reformed theology
did not remove individual responsibility for sin. In order to accurately represent Calvin’s theology, it
is necessary to quote at length:

> when it is said, that the sin of Adam has made us obnoxious to the justice of God, the
> meaning is not, that we, who are in ourselves innocent and blameless, are bearing his guilt,
> but that since by his transgression we are all placed under the curse, he is said to have
> brought us under obligation. Through him, however, not only has punishment been derived,
> but pollution instilled, for which punishment is justly due. Hence Augustine, though he
> often terms it another’s sin (that he may more clearly show how it comes to us by descent),
> at the same time asserts that it is each individual’s own sin. And the Apostle most distinctly
> testifies, that “death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned,” (Rom. 5:12); that is, are
> involved in original sin, and polluted by its stain. Hence, even infants bringing their
> condemnation with them from their mother’s womb, suffer not for another’s, but for their
> own defect. For although they have not yet produced the fruits of their own
> unrighteousness, they have the seed implanted in them. Nay, their whole nature is, as it were,
> a seed-bed of sin, and therefore cannot but be odious and abominable to God. (*Institutes* 217-
> 218)
As Calvin argues, the condition of innate sinfulness experienced by the individual becomes universal because this individual experience is one shared in common with all humanity. This is not to say for instance that Claudius would be somehow blameless for his murder of Old Hamlet – a crime that transgresses Christian law – because the action is still an individually performed one; however, the origin for such egregious depravity would be seen as the first Fall from grace.

Therefore, while the link between disabilities and sin is not broken, individualized fault is largely excised from the doctrine of the Reformed pulpit. Consequently, if one were to be born disabled, Reformed doctrine could posit the explanation of an understood fallen state of existence: Adam, “by sinning not only brought disaster and ruin upon himself, but also plunged our nature into like destruction; and that not only in one fault, in a matter not pertaining to us, but by the corruption into which he himself fell, he infected his whole seed” (Institutes 216). This in large part, as Stiker argues, is a result of relying upon the teachings of Christ: “Without denying the global connection between evil (and misfortune) and sin, Jesus quite decisively breaks the connection between disability and individual fault” (Stiker 33). Martin Luther’s Commentary on Romans furthers, “original [sin] enters into us; we do not commit it, but we suffer it. We are sinners because we are the sons of a sinner. A sinner can beget only a sinner, who is like him” (95). Such a statement by all accounts shifts blame from individuals to the collective by gesturing toward the inescapable state of depravity. Along these lines, the doctrine perpetuated in The Institutes of the Christian Religion largely removes personal shaming from the equation by instead arguing the shared experience of collective fallenness: “it is only an instance of the common lot of the whole human race. All of us, therefore, descending from an impure seed, come into the world tainted with the contagion of sin. Nay, before we behold the light of the sun we are in God’s sight defiled and polluted” (Calvin 215). Calvin makes it clear, here and elsewhere, that the only true interpretation of Original Sin is to recognize
universal depravity: “it is impossible to think of our primeval dignity without being immediately reminded of the sad spectacle of our ignominy and corruption, ever since we fell from our original in the person of our first parent” (Institutes 211). Inclusive pronoun usage of the first person plural “us” and “we” situates the reality of sin as an entirely shared experience, common to all humanity. According to Calvin and broader Reformed thought “all have sinned,” or more specifically all exist in the state of innate depravity, “and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23); or, to use Calvin’s words, “all are blinded” (emphasis mine, Institutes 212). Furthermore, the later theology of Jacobus Arminius continued the trajectory of this line of argumentation. In his “Disputation 7 on the First Sin of the First Man,” Arminius notes:

The whole of this sin, however, is not peculiar to our first parents, but is common to the entire race and to all their posterity, who, at the time when this sin was committed, were in their loins, and who have since descended from them by the natural mode of propagation, according to the primitive benediction. For in Adam “all have sinned.” (Rom. v. 12.) Wherefore, whatever punishment was brought down upon our first parents, has likewise pervaded and yet pursues all their posterity. (The Works of Jacobus Arminius 186)

Here and elsewhere, the rhetoric of early modern theological documentation preserves the link between disabilities and sin; however, it prefers the language of inclusivity by excising individualized fault in favor of universal culpability.

The sermons of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century clergy also utilize the inclusive language of shared experience when discussing the state of fallenness. For instance, in the 1623 version of Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches reprinted “by authority from King James I,” a text that would have been dispensed among the numerous congregations of the Church of England, is “A Sermon of the Misery of all Mankind, and of his Condemnation to Death everlasting, by his own Sin.” The second part of this sermon describes the fallenness of humankind as a matter of nature rather than nurture: “we have heard how evil we be of ourselves, how of ourselves, and by ourselves, we have no goodness, help, nor salvation; but contrariwise, sin, damnation, and death
everlasting...We are all become unclean; but we all are not able to cleanse ourselves, nor to make one another of us clean. We are by nature the children of God's wrath” (original emphasis, Jewel 14).

Phrasing the discussion of innate depravity in first person plural – “we,” “ourselves,” “us” – emphasizes the universality of sin and the suffering that occurs as a consequence of the first Fall. In addition to this disseminated sermon, John Owen, taking innate depravity in context in his sermon on “God’s withdrawing his presence, [and] the correction of his church,” pointedly uses generalized language to refer to “men” rather than particular individuals: “The second thing is, that God, in penal hardening, gives men up to Satan, to blind them, darken them, harden them; for he is 'the god of this world, that blinds the eyes of men,' and the great work of blinding and hardening men is committed unto him” (emphasis mine, “Sermon XXIV” The Sermons of John Owen 879). Strikingly, Owen’s description of sin incorporates sensory impairment, which – though it emphasizes the universality of sin and the punishments of it – falls under both the categories of metaphorizing disability and describing it as a punishment, albeit a universal one. “A Sermon Preached before the King, June 30th 1667,” by John Tillotson, Dean of Canterbury, corroborates the generalizing condition of human depravity – again incorporating inclusive language – in stating that “we are such perverse Creatures as not to be wrought upon by kindness, so wild as not to be tamed by gentle usage...It is our obstinacy and intractableness to the methods of his goodness which constraineth, and almost forceth him against his inclination, to take the Rod into his hand, and to chastise us with it” (5). Markedly, Tillotson infers physical affliction as God’s allotted punishment for sin:

If he sends Evils upon us, it is that thereby he may do us some greater good: If he afflict us, it is not because it is pleasant to him to deal harshly with us, but because it is profitable and necessary for us to be so dealt withal: And if at any time he imbitter our lives by miseries and sufferings, it is because he is loth to see us perish in pleasant ways, and chuseth rather to be somewhat severe towards us, than suffer us to be utterly undone. (6)

34 The use of the phrase “penal hardening” is in reference to the theory of penal substitutionary atonement, a doctrine that espouses that Christ’s death on the cross served as a substitute for the sins of mankind.
Because of the shift in thought regarding sin which emphasized *men* rather than *mankind*, whenever disabilities in terms of physical suffering, disease, ailment, or impairment were addressed in the Early Modern pulpit, as has been indicated in the selection of examples previously cited, they were largely referenced in relation to metaphorical import and not as an explanation for personal failure.

Therefore, as has been discussed, the cause of sensory disabilities, such as blindness, during the Middle Ages was often identified as personal sinfulness. Though of course the concept of Original Sin circulated during the medieval period, at the same time, accounts of disability during the Middle Ages also markedly imply *personal failure* as the trigger for disability. This is observed in both accounts of disability – such as *Le Garçon et l’Aveugle* – where an individual’s impairments or “blemish[es]” become outward reflections of an inward immorality. Though the belief in physiognomy persisted in the early modern era, theological rhetoric of the age seemed to push against individualized fault, instead regarding disability as implicative of universal fallenness. Thus, reformed theology emphasized the reality of mankind’s shared state of sinfulness, in large part excising the individualized blame attributed to the existence of impairment. Given the progressive dissemination of the belief in universalized sinfulness, it stands to reason that early modern theologians and philosophers would even more observably dismiss the belief that disabilities were manifestations of sin. This shift in ideology would eventually give way to the possibility of holistic education of the deaf; for, no longer objects of wrath, the deaf could become subjects capable of education, communication, and salvation.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to detail the various ways in which the Reformation – with its doctrinal fluctuations over the course of almost two centuries – affected the medieval Catholic interpretations of disabilities that early modern society would have otherwise inherited. In this
Introduction, I adapted the medieval religious model and categorized the early modern religious model in terms of its chronology and adaptability with one overarching observation: even as it rejected Catholic modes of perception, the late sixteenth-century religious model of disabilities nevertheless resembled the medieval by largely expressing a nonnegotiable interpretation of disabilities as tools for religious metaphor, manifestations of sin, or realizations of divine wrath. Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I will draw from literary example to prove that the seventeenth-century religious model of disabilities, paralleling the influx of diverse theology that accompanied sectarianism, inevitably began to entertain heterodox interpretations of disabilities and the disabled. After inheriting a uniform medieval religious model of disability based upon Catholic doctrine, the schism from the Catholic faith ultimately resulted in a seventeenth-century reformed model of disability characterized by religious diversity.\textsuperscript{35}

Perceptions of disabilities were not confined to a singular explanation in the Middle Ages; rather, there were many and varying acceptable conclusions regarding not only the cause or causes of impairment, but also the expected responses. Among these responses, the medieval disabled body was explained as a stimulant for charity, the possible site for miraculous cure, a religious metaphor, and also as a manifested consequence for a sinful lifestyle or the wrath of God. A system of exchange, as explained by Stiker, existed under the reign of the Catholic Church wherein both the rich and poor played roles and received compensation, whether monetary or spiritual. In the case of the rich, they received religious security because of their charitable act of philanthropy and often received the blessings of the poor; for the poor, they received the charity that they sought in order to survive. However, this voluntary, and arguably mutually beneficial system of exchange became

\textsuperscript{35} Although disability studies has long understood the distinction between “impaired” (as a physical state of being) and “disability” (as a societal response that renders impairment as a deficiency), in this dissertation project I will use the terms “impairment,” “debility,” and “disability” interchangeably as early modern society primarily understood impairment or debility as a detrimental affliction.
obsolete after the Reformation. With the advent of the Reformation came the removal of a Catholic imperative for charitable giving. The removal of this religious imperative also seemed to remove the burden of charitable responsibility from individuals themselves, instead resulting in a move from an individual spiritual responsibility to a sociopolitical imperative. Furthermore, societal distrust of the begging poor began to heighten with the proliferation of elaborate deceits by vagabonds, vagrants, and rogues in order to garner alms. The enhanced suspicion of vagrants during the sixteenth century contributed in its own way to diminished charitable giving.

Furthermore, enforced taxation to allot for the “deserving poor” relocated the giving of charity to the arena of policy, ostensibly removing the necessity of spontaneous and voluntary alms-giving in the minds of the better off.

A second medieval perception of the disabled body was as a potential site for miraculous cure. In the minds of the medieval population, taking Biblical accounts as a precedent, the disabled could be recipients of miraculous healing, and the individuals whose prayers were answered regarding the healing of the disabled could then use the miracle as proof positive in the case of potential canonization. Though of course the potential for miraculous cure directed unwarranted judgment upon the disabled who remained impaired, despite one – or perhaps several attempts – to seek divine healing, in large part, this view during the Middle Ages leaned towards a more positive reading of disabilities than the remaining interpretations. However, reformed theology, which largely removed such tangible signs of miracle in daily life – evidenced for instance in the changing doctrine of the Eucharist, which situated the taking of communion as a symbolic sign for Christ’s passion rather than a material participation – did not allow for such an interpretation of the disabled body.

While this perception of the disabled body in the Middle Ages fully espoused the real potential for

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36 Detailed in Harman’s *Caueat for Commen Cursetors* (1566).
miraculous cure, early modern reformed theology ostensibly excised the possibility for such miracle; some theologians even went so far as to claim that there was no longer a need for miracles in the early modern period and in fact that miracles had ceased to happen “no later than the fourth century, when Rome converted to Christianity” (Hooper qtd. in Levack 41). As has been suggested, the rejection of the possibility for miracle during the Reformation held direct implications regarding early modern perceptions of disabilities. Far from being viewed as a potential site for miraculous healing and testimony of God’s continuing presence in daily life, the disabled body became a site of suspicion connected with Catholic subterfuge.

While viewing the disabled body as a stimulus for charity or as the site for miracle during the Middle Ages resulted in largely positive interpretations, the connotations associated with the disabled body – as metaphor and punishment – were predominantly, if not completely, pejorative. Just as a failed healing was regularly construed as a sign of faithlessness, so the disabled body in general was widely used in order to discuss irreverence, ignorance, or lack of faith. Though certainly the original scriptural statements might not have carried an intentionally unfavorable statement regarding sensory impairment, the continued usage of such metaphors most certainly carried a residual judgment upon the existing impairments themselves, affecting sociological perceptions of disability in general. Furthermore, whereas the medieval explanations of the disabled body as a stimulus for charitable giving as an outward sign of inward Catholic consciousness or as the possible locus of miraculous healing were largely rendered null by the reformation of religious ideology and practice in early modern England, the understanding of disability as a religious metaphor remained largely the same. Though it could not be accurately stated that the Reformation exacerbated the medieval tendency to discuss disabilities in terms of metaphor, extant documentation indicates that the trend stayed largely unchanged. Doctrine written by Luther and Calvin metaphorizing disability,
later disseminated by such clergy as Hooper, Owen, and Donne verify the continuing trend to treat disability as a metaphor.

Finally, that medieval outlook which perceived of the disabled body as the visible punishment of God’s wrath did perceivably alter with the advent of the Reformation. While this viewpoint of the Middle Ages often interpreted the punishment for sin in terms of individualized causation, reformed theology more often attributed illness, disability, and other physical torment as a result of the primal Fall. As previously enunciated, the concept of Original Sin certainly circulated during the Middle Ages; at the same time, accounts of disability during the Middle Ages also markedly imply personal failure as the trigger for disability. Early modern rhetoric regarding disability in theological documents, however, more commonly implicated universal depravity. Thus, reformed theology emphasized the reality of mankind’s shared state of sinfulness, in large part excising the individualized blame attributed to the existence of impairment.

The education of the deaf, which I will argue as proof positive of the ideological shift occurring in the seventeenth century (in tandem with the continued fissuring of doctrinal beliefs in the Protestant faith) is philosophically related to both charitable attitudes that the Catholic Church held toward disabled individuals and to the pathological mindset underlying the perception of the disabled body as an opportunistic site for miraculous cure. These attitudes manifested in sympathy or pity that might prompt charity seemed to have likewise prompted early Catholic progenitors of Deaf education to undertake the instruction of the deaf. As briefly mentioned at the start of this introduction, though religious interpretations of sensory disability held predominant sway over societal views of the deaf and blind in both the Middle Ages and early modern England, there were isolated exceptions to the rule. As will be detailed further in chapter four, a monk of the Benedictine order – Pedro Ponce de León – undertook the education of deaf aristocrats in sixteenth-century
Spain, and in doing so, Pedro Ponce exhibited the countercultural conviction that the deaf were educable, capable of salvation, and even eligible to hold religious orders. Perhaps connected to the well-known Benedictine practice of utilizing manual signing while observing hours of prayerful silence, Pedro Ponce was not only equipped with some version of gestured language himself, but he also utilized it as he began to teach his deaf pupils to read printed text, lip read written Spanish, and eventually speak Spanish. The education of deaf Spanish aristocrats was a prominent practice, and multiple notable families sent their deaf children to the monastery at Oña to receive instruction by Pedro Ponce, and after his death, instruction continued with private tutors (such as Don Manuel Ramírez de Carrión) being hired by wealthy patrons for individual lessons.

The same concern regarding salvation for the deaf was addressed almost a century later in the Catholic-practicing country of the Netherlands by the Dutch physician, Anton Deusing, who “taught medicine, mathematics, and philosophy” at the universities of Groningen and Leyden (Teaching Language 38). After witnessing a deaf-mute “regularly attend[ing] sermons which he seemed to understand,” Deusing wondered if the man could “be admitted to the Holy Sacrament in spite of his deafness” (Teaching Language 38). Deusing came to the theological conclusion that deaf-mutes certainly could participate in the Catholic faith, and he accordingly wrote a Latin tract in 1656 where he sought to “establish that the mental capacities of deaf people [were] equal to those of the hearing, and in particular, that they are capable of acquiring spiritual knowledge, and hence are eligible for salvation. In order to make his case, Deusing had to circumvent the fact that ‘the Apostle’ stated that ‘faith comes by hearing’” claiming instead that God can use sight as well as hearing to impart faith to people (Teaching Language 39). It goes without saying that this perception of

37 In 1642 at the age of thirty, Anton Duesing “composed a Catholic Cosmography and Astronomy According to the Ptolemaic Hypothesis” or in Latin, Cosmographia catholica et astronomia secundum hypotheses Ptolemaei; because of the theme of his work, I have categorized Deusing as Catholic in this discussion (Thorndike 59).
the hearing impaired, as individuals capable of reason and intelligence as well as eligible for salvation – and worthy even to hold positions of authority in the Catholic Church – does not fit into the more narrow, medieval societal stigmas of the deaf.

The “curative” attitude that stimulated the pursuit of miraculous cure also influenced the seventeenth-century philosophical interest in England to educate the deaf. Rather than sending the hearing impaired on pilgrimages to ultimately come into contact with holy relics or particularly powerful Catholic miracle workers, wealthy families sought out tutors who might be able to “cure” their children’s muteness through education. Though the early modern education of the deaf certainly corresponds with the medieval tendency to view the disabled body for its potential to be miraculously cured, deaf education does not categorically correspond to the perceptions of the disabled body as a religious metaphor or as a manifested consequence for a sinful lifestyle or the wrath of God. Deaf education occupied a literal space unrelated to symbolic reference. Furthermore, the logical and pathological understanding of deafness/muteness depended almost entirely on a biological and medical approach, which largely discounted religious superstitions regarding the source of such impairments.

Over the course of the following four chapters, I will trace the shifts in religious ideology, which became manifest in the recorded dramatic, literary, and prose publications of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I will utilize the literature and context of the early modern era in order to demonstrate how variability in religious perspectives affected societal attitudes toward individuals with sensory impairments in the early modern era. Namely, I will prove through an examination of dramatic and nondramatic works, both canonical and lesser known, that disability perception altered noticeably from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century as society began to embrace increasingly heterodox interpretations of disability. Finally, I will prove that the multiplicity of religious belief in
the sixteenth and seventeenth century was reflected in shifting depictions of the sensorily impaired  
in literature, and that this changing ideology became fully realized with the advent of deaf education  
in the seventeenth century.
CHAPTER TWO

THE SPECTACLE OF FALSE IMPAIRMENT IN EARLY MODERN DRAMA

Society begins by singing its dreams, then narrates its deeds, and finally sets about describing what it thinks.

- Victor Hugo

Introduction

In recent years, disability critics Rosemarie Garland Thomson, David M. Turner, and Lindsey Row-Heyveld have addressed a prominent implication tied to the representation of disability, particularly the representation of feigned disability onstage.¹ Within this paradigm, they have sought to disclose the inextricable link between poverty and disability that history has fashioned as reality: “Then, as now, disability played a central, although often unacknowledged, role in any debate about social welfare, vagrancy, and charity. As Garland Thomson has asserted, ‘The history of begging is virtually synonymous with the history of disability’” (qtd. in *Dissembling Disability* 5).² The depiction of false impairment on the early modern stage is no exception, for the donning of false disability often accompanies the donning of false poverty.³ It is no coincidence, for example,

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¹ That is, characters that pretend to have a sensory, physical, or mental impairment as a means of maintaining disguise within the larger plot of the play.

² This chapter and the one following examine upper and lower class perceptions on disability; however, later chapters will focus on the lived experiences of upper class impaired individuals and incorporate the development of education for the early modern sensorily-impaired.

³ Beyond the plays analyzed in this chapter – which only focus on characters who exclusively feign sensory impairment – the use of any disability as a temporary mask often goes hand-in-hand with their adopted rags. The existence of the stock figure “Bedlam Beggar,” the role Edgar plays as “Tom O’Bedlam” in *King Lear* when he simultaneously pretends madness as well as poverty, is one such example.
that of the various plays that will be examined in this chapter and the one following it, three specifically include the nominalization “beggar,” and in two of those three designated titles, the word “blind” precedes “beggar.” Furthermore, in the majority of the plays examined in this chapter, nearly all of the characters that feign impairment also feign destitution. Whereas the current chapter will focus on instances of dissimulated sensory impairment in various plays and the consequent social commentary such representation begets, the third chapter will deal specifically with real disability as represented on the stage.

This chapter explores primarily sixteenth-century works that exemplify a uniform religious conception of disabilities, maintained under pressure during the Elizabethan Settlement. The portrayal of false impairment onstage demonstrates a cultural negotiation with and ultimate rejection of Catholic ideology in favor of reformed doctrine. A great number of early modern plays feature exaggerated depictions of disabilities by able-bodied actors – or “disability drag” as Tobin Siebers terms it in “Disability as Masquerade.” For this reason, Row-Heyveld has identified a “counterfeit-disability tradition” in early modern drama and classifies roughly forty plays in Dissembling Disability as falling within the strictures of this tradition (21). Disability theorists often categorize kinds of disability into physical disabilities, or impairments that strictly limit mobility, such as amputation or paralysis; cognitive disabilities, or impairments which limit cognitive and behavioral function, such as autism; and sensory disabilities, or impairments which limit the senses, such as blindness and deafness. Rather than touching more broadly upon disability writ large in early modern drama, this dissertation primarily concerns depictions of feigned sensory disability in various early modern

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4 The works referenced are Chapman’s The Blind Beggar of Alexandria; Chettle, Day, and Haughton’s The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green; and Fletcher and Massinger’s Beggars Bush.

5 Row-Heyveld’s Dissembling Disability boasts of some 40 early modern English dramas which concern the depiction of disability as disguise.
English plays.\textsuperscript{6} Taking up the “early modern stage tradition” of incorporating dissembled impairment that extended “from the 1580s to the 1640s,” I engage with early modern plays where characters feign sensory disability, focusing more distinctly on the effect of the Reformation on such representations (\textit{Dissembling Disability} 1).\textsuperscript{7} In this way, I comment on the ways that represented false disability affected disability-representation for both spectators and the early modern sensorily-disabled: how it “played a vital role in both shaping literary fantasies about the non-standard body and creating social realities for people with disabilities” (\textit{Dissembling Disability} 1-2).\textsuperscript{8} As the previous discussion detailed, in the early modern cultural imagination, disabilities were often referenced in terms of divine punishment, cure, and metaphor. This chapter will showcase examples proving that the same outlooks were carried publically onto the early modern stage, were reified through staged representation, and then carried back into social practice. The popular trend of depicting feigned impairment onstage resulted in the reinforcement of early modern skepticism and distrust toward

\textsuperscript{6} Most early modern representations of disability on-stage are feigned. This observation bears a twofold implication: first, representations of impairments by able-bodied actors are necessarily false as, during the early modern era, it can be stated with confidence that the vast majority of players did not actually experience the disabilities they counterfeited. In this way, disability was donned as any other facet of characterization would be, joining an understood list of character qualities, such as profession, dress, or accent. Second, the characters in the plays counterfeit disabilities to their own ends. A comparison of the relative number of staged legitimate disability versus staged feigned disability reveals that the early modern theatre was saturated with a preponderance of the latter. Taking up the first observation as a matter of course, this chapter interacts with the second in that I will be analyzing the implications of characters feigning sensory disability.

\textsuperscript{7} In her work, Row-Heyveld engages with early modern representations of disability indiscriminately; that is, rather than focusing on one kind or class of disability, she surveys all manner of representation. My study, however, focuses primarily on sensory disability and the representations of it.

\textsuperscript{8} Row-Heyveld argues, “The masquerade of disability demanded by the able-bodied public created a feedback loop of performance and suspicion. As people with disabilities were required to display and even amplify their disabilities...in order [to] demonstrate the validity of their disability, their able-bodied counterparts became increasingly wary of that display” (\textit{Dissembling Disability} 13). My project takes for granted the validity of reinforced suspicion in the early modern public, bolstered by disingenuous depictions of impairment on the stage. The end of this project, however, is to argue how this stage tradition functioned as a means for reformed society to reject the prior values of the medieval Church.
the disabled poor, which in turn functioned as a rejection of the medieval religious impulse toward charity.

The Feedback Loop Between Representation and Reality

From the first recorded critical responses to Classical drama, the conception of drama or theatrical productions as *mimesis* or “direct imitation” of life has been popularly recognized. The tradition that Classical philosophers established in first enunciating the importance they saw in mimicking reality – whether they emphasized its reality to encourage *praxis* or to discourage it – was reaffirmed in early modern philosophy and forward through the beginning of the twentieth-century. As New Historicism observes, all literature is often interpreted as representative of life, but beyond simply mimicking life, it has the potential to impact life and even effect societal response. The New Historical concept of “the dialectical nature of cultural representations” is articulated and applied to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Louis Montrose: “*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, then, in a double sense, a creation of Elizabethan culture: for it also creates the culture by which it is created, shapes the fantasies by which it is shaped, begets that by which it is begotten” (61, 86). This potential impact is critical in terms of disability representation because the identity marker “disabled,” like any identity category, is socially-constructed.  

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9 The basis of this observation has been the grounds for the contemporary push for disability representation in theatre. As impaired individuals rightly claim, the experience of disability can only truly be understood by the disabled themselves. The concept of “disability drag,” when the able-bodied take on roles of disabled characters, is discussed in detail by Tobin Siebers in “Disability as Masquerade.” This line of argument has been seen particularly in reference to Deaf representation in stage and film adaptations. In theatrical productions and even in film, there is a prevalent problem of casting Hearing actors for Deaf characters partially due to the belief that sign language can be believably taught in the course of a show’s production. As Sara Novic posits, these “casting and production choices” are made “out of convenience and fear. By refusing to work with disabled actors, they avoid anything that might force them to stray too far from the stereotypes so ingrained in our culture” (np). Rather than hiring Deaf talent, Hearing actors are taught “rudimentary sign language” which ultimately results in an unrealistic and “clumsy performance” of ASL from characters who are meant to have signed since childhood (Novic np).
Though the question has been raised regarding whether one might address the depictions of disability when analyzing disability per se, Row-Heyveld explains, “when scholars acknowledge disability as an operational identity category in the early modern period, they have largely not read instances of feigned impairment as contributing to understandings of disability because they are, by necessity, false” (Dissembling Disability 23). Her resounding reply to Disability Studies scholars’ objections to analyzing feigned impairment is that, of course, “Counterfeit disability is not real disability…But as disability theorists have long worked to demonstrate, culture constructs disability” and therefore depictions of false impairments still impact societal perceptions of disability (Dissembling Disability 23). In terms of the early modern cultural imagination, theatrical representations of disability can be understood as a cultural feedback loop: depictions of disability on the stage were presumably based on reality, as early modern playwrights described impairments in scripts and early modern actors performed them according to their own interpretations of impairment. Those representations of disability on the stage then helped to reinforce stereotypes held in the minds of the audience and further impressed upon reality, and this circular relationship continued. Because of this circular relationship, early modern portrayals of disabilities in the theatre can be used to analyze early modern attitudes toward disability across social strata. Thus drama, as a

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10 Row-Heyveld utilizes the phrase “feedback loop” as she discusses the ways that onstage feigned disability reinforced cultural suspicions of the impaired in society. Row-Heyveld’s usage relates to Siebers’ observation that “disability drag” by the able-bodied “provid[es] an exaggerated exhibition of people with disabilities but question[s] both the existence and permanence of disability” (“Disability as Masquerade” 18). I use the term with a difference: I note how inherited stereotypes of impairment must have influenced the representation of the impaired by playwrights and actors as well as how the exaggeration of impairment would naturally lead to increased pressure on the part of the genuinely disabled to “masquerade” more drastically to be deemed one of the “deserving poor.” Though of course reinforced suspicion was one consequence of feigned disability (as Row-Heyveld notes), I also incorporate Sieber’s observations that public “masquerades” of “disability” by both the impaired and able create a societal expectation for the expression of disability (“Disability as Masquerade” 11).
mimetic vehicle inciting praxis, inevitably responded to already-observed cultural practice as well as stimulated future responses by its example.

To put these observations together, the depiction of the impaired onstage and the resulting interactions between able-bodied and impaired characters in popular performances would ostensibly impact the means by which the socially-constructed opinions of the spectators regarding the disabled were formed. Upper class characters that appear as disabled onstage almost always simultaneously feign those impairments, whether or not their motives to do so are noble. Historically, feigned impairment has called into question the authenticity of legitimate disability; thus, it is no surprise that early modern depictions of false impairment would have begot skepticism, not only by theatregoers, but also by other onstage characters. In general, characters’ primed cynical responses encouraged the assumption that the disabled beggars met in life might also be feigning or exaggerating their own conditions. This in turn would have discouraged individual and spontaneous almsgiving when met with the seemingly disabled poor in real life. As Linda Woodbridge argues, the prevalence of false disability provided “the very foundation of bureaucratic control of poor relief in that it provided a pretext for taking charity out of individual hands…[F]ear of counterfeit disability was a pivotal element in the shift away from individual charity to beggars and toward a state-

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11 The possibility for art to change behavior, as Paul Ricoeur notes, is marked in both Aristotle’s Poetics and in his Rhetoric. However, Ricoeur moves beyond Aristotle’s implicative suggestions by concretely noting the relationship between the dramatic and real world: “Generalizing beyond Aristotle, I shall say that mimesis, marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem [or drama] and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality” (Time and Narrative 71). Ricoeur’s mimesis situates itself in the person of the spectator or reader, who engages with a specific work, intermingling the conception of the world – as the spectator/reader understood it before the work – and the presentation of a world – as the work presents it – to form a new perception of life. Whereas Aristotle saw tragedy as mimesis praxeos (or the imitation of action), in semiotic terms, the imitation of life (mimesis) onstage becomes the grounds for behavioral change or action in the lives of the spectator (praxi). In such an equation, the relationship of the literature/drama/ artwork to the reader/spectator becomes causal. For more discussion of the intersection between dramatic and real world, see Keir Elam’s The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama.
sponsored relief system” (qtd. in *Dissembling Disability* 8). Specifically, as the following sections will endeavor to prove, the depictions of feigned sensory disability on the early modern stage more often than not perpetuated unsympathetic responses to the disabled poor.

**Impersonated Impairment Onstage and the Didactic Instruction of Skepticism**

A survey of late-sixteenth and early seventeenth-century plays reveals the variability with which early modern society may have responded to the feigning of disability, which echoes the early modern outlooks on disability either accepted or rejected from the Middle Ages following the Reformation. Noting the causes for which characters pretend impairment, Row-Heyveld writes:

> On stage, characters fake disability for myriad reasons: They put on the disability disguise for money, but also for love, position, politics, revenge, reputation, critique, even fun. Playwrights also employ the trope for varied thematic ends: to interrogate issues of epistemological proof, to explore the relationship between the body and identity, and to ask political and theological questions about charity and virtue. Further, playwrights adopted this handy theatrical instrument for literary ends: to construct character, to solve narrative problems, to draw attention to the manufactured theatricality of their dramas, and to critique the practices of the commercial theater. (*Dissembling Disability* 4)

While this observation highlights the *motivations* for such actions, my own commentary upon sociocultural and religious attitudes – as they were demonstrated on the early modern stage – depends upon a detailed investigation in each play of the *responses* of the other characters in productions to such dissimulation. A focus on the reactions of onstage characters to disabled characters, based on the concepts of *mimesis* and *praxis*, can be transferred into a discussion of similar interactions between the abled-bodied and impaired that may have occurred among early modern English society. What this investigation reveals is that the different responses to feigned impairment are constituted either of praise or punishment and that these reactions also depend almost entirely on the designated social status of the character performing the deception. All of the following plays, originally performed in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, depict upper class characters manipulating their peers with the disguise of disability: *Fair Em* (1590), Chapman’s *The
Blind Beggar of Alexandria (1596), Chettle, Day, and Haughton’s The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green (1600), Fletcher and Massinger’s Beggars Bush (1622), and James Shirley’s The Sisters (1642).

There are several principal implications regarding disability disguise that directly correspond with early modern societal responses to disability discussed in the previous chapter. Firstly, the dialogue, plot, and action of primarily Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas often reveal the real suspicion that sixteenth-century English society felt toward the outward-seeming disabled. The dialogue, for instance, in Fair Em confirms a general anxiety and suspicion toward impairment, which Row-Heyveld discusses at length. Fair Em, set shortly following the 1066 Anglo-Norman invasion of what would become England, is a play heavily incorporating the early modern delight in disguise. The drama follows two main plotlines. First, William the Conqueror falls irrevocably in love with the image of Princess Blanche that is displayed on Marques Lubeck’s shield and decides to journey in disguise (as Sir Robert of Windsor) to the Danish court to win her love. Upon seeing Blanche in person, he finds her unappealing and becomes smitten instead with Mariana, the betrothed of Marques Lubeck. Mariana, who remains loyal to Lubeck, contrives a plot where Blanche will disguise herself as Mariana, in order to bring about the successful marriages of Mariana to Lubeck and Blanche to William I. Second, back in William the Conqueror’s domain, three young courtiers (Manville, Mountney, and Valingford) have fallen in love with Fair Em, the daughter of exiled Duke Goddard. None of the suitors realize the true identity of Em, who has been living with her father in Manchester under the guise of a miller’s daughter. Em favors Manville, but his unreasonable jealousy over the other two courtiers drives Em to extremes. In order to remain absolutely faithful to Manville – who fears that she might look upon a more handsome suitor or hearken to another’s wooing – Em feigns deafness with Mountney, blindness with Valingford, and then both impairments when the two men happen to be in the same location.
Throughout Em’s dissembling, in which she is able to more or less successfully fool not only two of her three suitors but also her own father, the men’s dialogue reveals a latent suspicion for false impairment as they repeatedly doubt the legitimacy of her impairment. In Act 2, scene I, Em pretends that she cannot hear Mountney’s courting so that she can sidestep the jealous accusations of disloyalty from her intended, Manville. However, despite Em’s resolute impersonation of deafness, Mountney continues to woo her and speculates whether or not Em’s sudden impairment is an act: “But Mountye, stay: this may be but deceit, / A matter fained only to delude thee” (2.1). It is important to note that an almost identical response of suspicion occurs when Em subsequently feigns blindness with Valingford after being “stricken blind, by mishap, on a sudden”: to this explanation, Valingford responds,

But is it possible you [Em] should be taken on such a sudden? 
Infortunate Valingford, to be thus crost in thy love!... 
But, Valingford search the depth of this devise. Why may not this be fained subteltie[?]

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When all three lovers appear at her doorstep a few scenes later, Em is forced to perform both blindness and deafness in an effort to maintain her individual deceptions with Valingford and Mountney. At this outrageous turn of events, even her father seems initially hesitant to believe her. Relying entirely on his own sensory perception and conceived understanding of how sensory impairment should manifest, Duke Goddard demands: “Tell me, sweet Em, how came this blindness? Thy eyes are / lovely to look on, and yet have they lost the benefit of / their sight. What a grief is this to thy poor father!” In this response, Goddard insinuates an expectation of damaged eyesight to

12 Although analysis using the medical model of disability is not used in this study, those who are drawn to this particular model of disability studies should note that following each of these conversations, both suitors suggest their willingness to consult a court physician to attempt curing Em’s sensory impairment[s]. In this way, the false impairments in Fair Em become a means to practice medical cure, rather than miraculous cure; however, the existence of the impairments themselves is referenced almost in terms of the miraculous.
be visibly detectable to others. All of these men who want to believe their beloved, nevertheless doubt that Em has been stricken with genuine impairment, and readers/spectators are able to confirm that their suspicion is completely valid. The lesson an early modern audience might have gleaned from these encounters in *Fair Em* is that a general distrust of seeming disability is justified. In this way, the farcical demonstration of first Em’s deafness, followed by her blindness, and concluded with her deaf/blindness – all in an attempt to ward off persistent suitors – functions as an affirmation of societal fears of disingenuous impairment among the seemingly disabled poor.

As regards early modern religious conceptions of sensory disability, this play also confirms the reformed view of disability as a form of divine punishment, a belief corroborated by a great number of early modern sermons. Regarding the event of Em’s various feigned disabilities, both Manville and Em describe their cause in terms of justified divine wrath. After being informed that Em has suffered both blindness and deafness, Manville observes that Em’s impairments are her punishment for the lust to which he assumes Em has succumbed: “This is God's judgement for her treachery” (3.4). Em herself verifies that she believes her impairments are a result of God’s will in dialogue with both Valingford and her father. The reader must remember that Em understands the erroneousness of her alleged impairment; however, despite the fact that her disability is feigned, Em’s dialogue reinforces the popular religious belief that impairment was visited on the disabled by God. In response to Valingford’s pressing questions regarding her sudden affliction, Em states that her previous sins of lust caused her to be stricken with blindness but that the fortunate result of such blindness is that it has given her more cause to beg forgiveness: “More reason I should ghostly give my self / To sacred prayers for this my former sin, / For which this plague is justly fallen upon me, / Then to harken to the vanities of love” (2.2). Later, Em confirms this divine cause when her

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13 For specific examples, see the Introduction, “Defining the Early Modern Religious Model of Disabilities.”
father mourns at the loss of both her vision and hearing: “Is this my father? – Good father, give me leave to sit where I may not be disturbed, sith God hath visited me both of my sight and hearing” (3.4). Aligning with the inherited medieval conception wherein certain impairments were considered manifestations of vices, Em attributes the disabilities she pretends to God’s judgment for lust. In so doing, Em – and the play in general – comments upon the religious conception of sensory disability as a sign of divine wrath, verifying its popular religious influence over early modern society.

The dialogue of Lord Antonio and Francescina in James Shirley’s *The Sisters* (1642) also reveals the suspicion directed toward seeming disability and confirms that after the passage of several decades, the early modern concern for policing vagrancy and disability was still active. In James Shirley’s *The Sisters*, a play published just prior to the closing of the theatres, the two titular sisters – Paulina and Angelina – are counter opposites of conduct, exemplifying pride and humility, respectively. After the death of their father, the eldest daughter, Paulina, becomes the inheritor of his fortune and land in Italy, while Angelina is resigned to her future life as a nun. Lord Antonio, their uncle, hopes to aid each woman in reaching equilibrium, Paulina being considered far too prideful, and Angelina too humble. However, after being disdained by Paulina, Antonio focuses his attention on educating Angelina as a means of spiting Paulina. Angelina, a beautiful yet humble woman, attracts the attention of the nobleman Contarini and eventually Farnese, the Prince of Parma. At the conclusion of the play, Paulina is revealed to be the changeling daughter of Angelina’s

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14 The waiting woman of the noblewoman Angelina, who is Antonio’s niece and the destined Princess of Parma.

15 Although I argue that the writing and performance of plays with feigned impairment demonstrates the negotiation of an early modern reformed response to disability and a rejection of prior medieval religious responses to the same, several scholars have posited their own arguments regarding the motivating stimulus for such texts as *Beggars Bush* and *The Sisters*. Specifically, Rosemary Gaby and Julie Sanders both examine the theme of beggars’ commonwealths, the former in arguing that society enjoyed romanticizing and idealizing the lives of vagabonds and the latter in arguing that the portrayal of beggars’ commonwealths was a commentary on Charles’ Personal Rule.
wet-nurse, who in a panic after the death of the real infant Paulina, exchanged her own daughter to avoid accusations of neglect. Paulina is effectively humbled by her false status as a gentlewoman, the subsequent removal of her inheritance, and by her marriage to Frapol – the bandit chief who had duped Paulina into believing that he was the real Prince of Parma. Meanwhile, Angelina is betrothed to Farnese and becomes the sole inheritor of both her father’s and her uncle Lord Antonio’s fortunes and provinces.

In the middle of the play, Lord Antonio decides to make Angelina his heir in order to spite Angelina’s outrageously proud sister, Paulina, the original inheritor of their father’s land and wealth. In order to verify Angelina’s worthiness as an executor of immense wealth and power, Lord Antonio puts her to a test. The following scene is of utmost importance because it reemphasizes the instructional role that early modern dramas could play and perhaps the role they were intended to play for receptive early modern audience members; namely, to reinforce that feigned disability by unlicensed beggars would inevitably be discovered and punished by the discerning elite. In Act 2, Lord Antonio remarks that he hopes to educate his two nieces to make Paulina more humble and to somehow generate a greater sense of pride in Angelina. In general, it is their polarized behavior that

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16 It should be noted that the writing and performance of this play occurred following the transition from public to private theatres in the early seventeenth century. Because of this, one could speculate that the instructional nature of this scene becomes even more so catered toward the upper classes and wealthy patrons of the private theatre who would be observing the play. As Roslyn Knutson relates in her chapter on Jacobean and Caroline Theatre in The Cambridge History of British Theatre: “the theatre lost its popular base and depended more on the support of the elite, [and] playwriting became more a political game than a commercial one” (363). The popularity of James Shirley, the playwright of The Sisters, was largely due to his obeisance to the patron/artist relationship popularized in the system of private theatres: “James Shirley…was nonetheless a cut above [fellow playwrights] because he successfully acquired patrons and succeeded to Shakespeare’s place as chief poet with the King’s Men” (Knutson 355). Indeed, “During his career Shirley wrote most of his thirty-eight plays independently, affiliated himself with a company, directed his plays at a specific audience, published the plays with title-page advertisements of his authorship, and courted a variety of patrons” (emphasis mine, 361). The reality of the playwright and the likely audience of The Sisters make the “education” on discerned charitable giving all the more poignant, for Angelina’s naivety serves more distinctly as a lesson for spectators.
causes him endless aggravation: “Her younger Sister...does vex me as much / With her humility, as the other with / Her impudence (2.140-42). Lord Antonio remarks to Paulina that he will bestow his own wealth and influence on Angelina to spite her older sister. Although Angelina’s original plan was to join a convent and serve the church, Antonio reveals to Paulina that he has other ideas for his favored niece:

Although her foolish Father, (yet he was
My Brother) I have not power to speak
Well o'th'dead, gave thee [Paulina] his whole Estate,
I have a fortune, dost thou hear? I have,
And to vex thee, thy Sister [Angelina] shall have that,
I'll see, and I can make her proud, I'll do't;
She shall have Servants, Suters, Fidlers, Flatterers,
Fine Cloathes, and all the food that can provoke
To glorifie her sense; I have bags to spare,
She shall not to a Nunnery to vex thee. (2.333-42)

With this resolve, however, comes the necessity of educating Angelina on the proper dispensation of wealth. Antonio decides to test if Angelina can detect deception by the apparent scores of fraudulent beggars.

The text is not entirely clear in its stage directions nor in its designated characters in the scene at hand in Act 4. I posit that in this scene, Antonio outfits himself in the beggarly disguise of “Citizen 1” in order to test his niece's naivety by bringing to the castle what he knows are beggars counterfeiting debility while seeking alms:

Angelina: I prethee let 'em enter.

Enter three Petitioners

Francescina: The room will not be sweet again th[ese] three days;
But if it be your pleasure --- know your distance.
Angelina: The blind, and lame, what's your condition Sir?
[Citizen] 1: As miserable Madam as the Sea,
That swallow'd all my wealth, can make a man,
That once commanded thousands, I blush to beg
But Nature too impatient of sterving
Compels me to this boldness, you may soon
Peruse my tragick story there.

\textit{Gives a Paper}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
Angelina: & Good old man! \\
Francescina: & What is his loss to you? \\
\textbf{[Citizen] 2}: & My Petition too; \\
 & A poor blind man, that hath lost more by fire \\
 & Than his estate valued a thousand times; \\
 & And 'tis but equall, fire should spoil my eys, \\
 & That ravish'd me of all, was precious to 'em, \\
 & A wife and pretty Children. \\
Angelina: & Burn'd? \\
\textbf{[Citizen] 2}: & All burn'd; \\
 & And what my eys cannot afford their memory \\
 & My poor heart weeps in bloud. \\
\textbf{[Citizen] 3}: & I am a Souldier \\
 & That in my Countries service lost my limbs; \\
 & I've had more lead in bullets taken from me \\
 & Than would repair some Steeple. \\
\end{tabular}

In this particular scene, “Citizen 2” pretends to be a man who lost his sight and family in the same fire while “Citizen 3” pretends to be a crippled soldier, leaning on “wooden leggs” or crutches. After they give their false accounts, Angelina believes their claims – “Poor souls! I pitty 'em here honest men, / Divide this bag, and pray for my good Uncle” (emphasis mine, 4.348-49) – and bequeaths large sums of her uncle’s money to them.\textsuperscript{17} Throughout the scene the play’s audience simultaneously experiences Angelina’s instruction as they undergo the same test. Although Francescina gives sardonic commentary throughout the scene – “Ring the bells, / That was a loud one!” (4.340-41) – the counterfeited disabilities are not blatantly revealed until Antonio uncovers their dissimulation along with his own disguise as Citizen 1. Thus, the play reinforces how easily citizens may be duped by the tricks of seemingly-impaired beggars. The text is as follows; again, because neither the exit of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{17} Note the allusion to the charitable system of exchange previously discussed in Chapter 1, wherein the giving of alms by the wealthy is traded for the blessings or prayers of the disabled poor.}
Citizen 1 nor the entrance of Antonio is ever specified, we can assume that “Citizen 1” is the disguised Lord Antonio who inevitably orders to “send for some Officers”:

[Citizen] 2: Equall division [of the money], come.
[Citizen] 1: Stay, in the first place, I brought you hither, Therefore my part is most considerable.
[Citizen] 3: I'lv have no Prerogative.
[Citizen] 2: Nor I.
[Citizen] 1: But I will. Do not I know you both for cheating Rascals? Thus are good meanings cozen'd, and you sha'not Lose your reward; send for some Officers.
[Citizens] 2, 3: We are betraid.

Ex. 2, 3.

Ant. [sic]: My Uncle.

Ant[onio]: They have found their eyes and legs again, Neece I observe your Charity, but you see not The inside of these things, and I did mean And hope these sums might serve your self; Some Ladies would have considered A new Gown and trinkets; Francescina, I see little amendment, she'l undo me In pious uses. (emphasis mine)

After Angelina, pitying the seemingly disabled beggars, dispenses alms – the men begin arguing about how they should divide up their profits. It is at this moment that “Citizen 1” disappears in the text, and Antonio – who prior was not listed among the characters in the scene – suddenly appears. Markedly, it is Citizens 2 and 3 who flee the scene while Citizen 1 remains unmentioned.

Upon discovering his own disguise, Antonio reveals the tricks of the two beggars who feign disability in this scene, seizes the bequeathed money, and calls for the arrest of the fraudulent beggars. Throughout the scene, Angelina’s maid Francescina voices suspicion and even disbelief at the accounts told by the counterfeit beggars. Referring to the exaggerated tale of woe by the false blind beggar and false cripple, Francescina derisively rebuts “Ring the bells, / That was a loud one!”
and further interrupts the false tale of the seeming crippled beggar (Citizen 3), casting doubt upon his entire narrative. Antonio’s gentle chastising of Angelina could be equally directed toward the audience, who would understandably take the visible impairments of the beggars at face value, as Angelina does. This dual instruction effectively reinforces the scene’s didactic message: anyone can be as easily fooled as Angelina, so trust must be placed in the law and the discerning nobility that put it in place.

The history of distrusting sensory disability, as Büttner argues, had its beginnings on the Continent in the late Middle Ages: “In total the estimation of blind people as needy became in the 14th and 15th centuries entirely negative. They were met with distrust and charged with crookedly faking blindness, and possibly calculated to have been blinded to better be able to beg, to tell tall tales, and to improve their alms through theft. Regularly, blind and the blinded were named as scammers and thieves in the lists” (8-9). This distrust only increased with time and the changes that were made to the cultural model of charity as early modern reformed society completely rejected the Catholic religious model of disabilities. Under the medieval model of charitable giving, the relationship between the alms-giving individual and the recipient of charity lent itself to a mutual benefit that was for the most part missing from an early modern model of charitable giving. Thus, if an outwardly disabled individual proved to be falsely impaired, the individual who gave charitably would still receive the spiritual benefit from his or her act of beneficence. This of course makes sense for the medieval benefactor, for with one’s own salvation at stake, an individual would necessarily be less concerned with whether or not the objects of their charity were legitimately impaired. Angelina’s incorrect response of immediate trust, falling into a more Catholic worldview of indiscriminate charity, is described as a foolish innocence: “Neece I observe your Charity, but you see not / The inside of these things… Francescina / I see little amendment, she’l undo me / In pious
uses” (emphasis mine, 4.362-69).\(^7\) In order to highlight Angelina’s naivety, Lord Antonio utilizes sight, or lack of it, as a metaphor for wisdom. In this case, Angelina might as well be physically blind for all the blind trust she demonstrates. Rather than taking impairment at face value, Antonio validates with his support of Francescina’s skepticism that the early modern individual’s first response to seeming impairment should be skepticism, for it is very likely that a beggar’s impairments are counterfeit.

This play, like the forthcoming discussion of the play *Beggars Bush*, similarly pushes back against Catholic practices of charitable giving. In this way, sixteenth-century drama ostensibly bolstered the doctrinal reformation as much as it reinforced the legislative push for government-controlled support of the “deserving poor.” The giving of charity in itself is not rejected by Lord Antonio, for in Act III he criticizes Paulina for the way she runs her household to the neglect of the deserving poor:

> Her house is open for these Mountebanks, Cheaters, and Tumblers, that can foist and flatter My Lady Gugaw; Every office open, When Poor men that have worth and want an Alms, May perish ere they pass the Porters lodge. (3.87-91)

As these lines suggest, the play does not neglect the necessity of alms to the “Poor men” that actually deserve charity; however, the inferred condition, confirmed in the following Act, is that the “Poor men” must be truly deserving and not like the “Cheaters” that “foist and flatter.” Francescina’s and Lord Antonio’s responses to Angelina heavily emphasize not only Angelina’s general naivety but expose the faulty system of blindly haphazard charitable exchange. Furthermore, their responses more accurately represent the Reformed legislation of the sixteenth- and early

\(^7\) Angelina’s response to not only give alms but also crave the prayers of the beggars accurately represents the Catholic gift of charitable exchange.
seventeenth-centuries: Antonio’s call for immediate arrest of the false beggars reflects the legal enforcement of the English Poor Laws on vagrancy and unlicensed begging. The perpetuation of this anxiety contributed in its own way to a diminishment in individual charitable giving as well as consequently bolstered the grave legislation described in the English Poor Laws. Thus, in both *Fair Em* and *The Sisters*, plays that are separated by nearly fifty years, the dialogue and action mirror the real, though misplaced, suspicions of dissimulation that early modern society felt toward the seeming disabled and indicates an ongoing negotiation with prior medieval models for disability perception.  

Onstage representations of the foiled plans of beggars and thieves, especially in their counterfeit disguises of impairment, reinforced a healthy suspicion of visible disability in society by elevating the early modern anxiety of being cheated or robbed by tricksters or the pretend-impaired. They expressed the likelihood that at most the impairment one might witness in the streets was entirely false and that at least, if legitimate, it was grossly exaggerated in order to garner much-needed charity:

The masquerade of disability demanded by the able-bodied public created a feedback loop of performance and suspicion. As people with disabilities were required to display and even amplify their disabilities—however authentic their impairments actually may have been—in order demonstrate the validity of their disability, their able-bodied counterparts became increasingly wary of that display. Because of the pressure to select only the ‘deserving poor’ and to avoid swindling oneself by giving away alms to a sturdy beggar, the charitable encounter became ever more dramatic. (*Dissembling Disability* 14-15)

At the same time, these onstage representations sought to pacify such fears by revealing the power of the state to inevitably recognize such trifling tricks. Though early modern depictions of feigned disability carried the potential to heighten the fear, among spectators, of tricksters and rogues in

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19 This suspicion, as Row-Heyveld notes, has been proven to be unjustified according to historical record, for “in spite of the stereotype’s proliferation in literature and its prevalence in cultural debates about poverty and charity, there appears to be very little historical evidence of beggars actually faking disability in early modern England” (*Dissembling Disability* 3). Her research has shown that the comparative number of historical accounts of feigned disability, which is slight, stands in stark contrast with the relative dramatized and fictional accounts of it (*Dissembling Disability* 3-4).
everyday life who would feign disability to cheat well-meaning individuals from their money, the presentation of inevitable recognition of feigned disability worked to create an entirely different audience response. Namely, Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic depictions of feigned impairment with predictable recognition and often punishment worked as propaganda for the state in its repeated demonstration that current legislation was effectively accomplishing the same outcome.

The English Poor Laws and the preaching from the pulpit in early modern England often emphasized the probability that many seemingly-impaired beggars were counterfeiting disability. However, the didactic aspect of dramatic art – its ability to teach with delight – in addition to several early modern plays with dialogue mimicking corrective instruction indicates again and again that the determination of true and counterfeit disability would eventually be discovered. That is, the repeated onstage demonstration of proving and ultimately uncovering the deceptions of beggars and thieves indicated that select individuals were indeed capable of making correct interpretations. Furthermore, the message behind these didactic scenes strongly imply that the power of discovery should be placed squarely in the hands of the perceptive upper class and public officials because “impairment was open to interpretation” and so often the less cunning failed to recognize illegitimate disability (Dissembling Disability 10).

Through the onstage process of uncovering deceptions, early modern spectators might mentally practice their own encounters or at least adopt a healthy attitude of mistrust. However, early modern drama emphasizes that the unmasking power ultimately lay in the hands of the elite, for the characters who are wise enough to see through dissembling disguises in these plays are almost always members of the upper class or are state representatives. For instance, with Fair Em, Valingford uncovers Em’s dissembling, and in The Sisters, it is Lord Antonio and Francescina that
ascertain the beggars’ falseness. Thus, early modern drama reifies the powerful influence of the state, and early modern individuals could comfort themselves in the knowledge that current legislation and enforcement had society’s best interest in mind, that such deceits would be easily identified by the state, and that the state was actively protecting naïve albeit well-meaning citizens.

The Case for Disability Disguise among the Early Modern Elite

Unsurprisingly, a critical investigation into the trope of impersonated impairment reveals that the issue of deception is decidedly an issue of class: for the rich, it often becomes a game for passing time, for the poor, it becomes a matter of necessity and survival. In most cases, the successful pretense of disability by a gentleman or gentlewoman is lauded as cleverness and is rewarded verbally and often materially in the form of successful matrimony with extravagant dowries and wealth, the reclamation of inheritance or royal favor, or the claiming of a higher position of power. This trend, evident in early modern drama, acts as an indication of the societal tendency that John L. McMullan notes in his work on “Crime, Law and Order in Early Modern England”:

Samaha, in his work on the Elizabethan period, notes that for those of yeoman and gentlemen backgrounds the criminal law was open to widespread intervention and manipulation. These groups easily exploited their power in the community, had indictments squashed before trial, intimidated their lessers in order to avoid prosecution, and stubbornly defied the court system by refusing to attend trial procedures. Gentlemen, we are told, were escaping trial, “at the shocking rate of 79 per cent, and nothing was done to stop it” (Samaha, 1974, p. 55). Above the law, the élite often felt they could play ducks and drakes with it. As Sharpe (1984, p. 148) notes of laws regulating personal conduct, “the most striking unanimity shown by the Commons . . . was that the upper orders of society should be subjected to their penalties as little as possible.” (262).

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20 For a woman of Angelina’s rank, her waiting woman would most likely have also been a member of an upper class or privileged family.

21 Because in many of these instances, the characters pretending impairment are already rich nobles who don’t return the money they gain through begging, these plays might also be commenting on the “highway robbery” by the social elite.
As is indicated here, the early modern elite are depicted on stage and in reality to brazenly pursue crime with relative impunity. Several examples of early modern plays in the late sixteenth-century demonstrate the ways in which deceitful portrayals of impairment could be manipulated for gain.

Perhaps the most glaring example of skepticism toward seeming disability being encouraged on the early modern stage is seen in George Chapman’s *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*. *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria* is known to be the “first surviving...[and] among the most successful of the Lord Admiral's Company's plays recorded in Henslowe's diary” (Hirrel 79). In fact, it “was played twenty-two times between February 1595 and April 1597” (Hyland 22). Though it is numbered among the over eight hundred extant plays in W. W. Greg’s *A Bibliography of English Printed Drama to the Restoration*, rarely does the play garner pedagogic or academic attention. The lack of scholarly and performative interest may be because the play lacks what Peter Hyland describes as “aesthetic quality,” or as Michael J. Hirrel more bluntly puts, “It has few overtly funny lines. It skims along from one implausible situation to the next, with little motivation and less logic. It seems to the reader, despite its sensational subject matter, pretty dull” (79). Another potential reason for its lack of critical attention may be that the extant text of the play is seemingly incomplete; it “omits the main plot almost entirely...containing a little more than sixteen hundred lines” (Hyland 25-26). Hyland argues that the extant text is most likely “a version cut for performance that gave the audience what the audience wanted – Irus [the protagonist] not as a romantic or martial hero, but as an amoral comic intriguer – and also as a transparent device to show off the player's skills” (26). In 1958, Ennis Rees attempted to settle the confusion regarding the play’s genre and ostensibly missing plot by claiming that the play should be understood as “a deliberate parody of the erotic element in Marlovian poems and drama...[that] ends with a final ridiculous reminder of Tamburlaine” (62).

Though many modern-day scholars continue to overlook *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, the play’s
depiction of blindness as well as its overt popularity in the early modern era renders it an important case study when examining sixteenth-century attitudes toward sensory impairment.

The main plot of The Blind Beggar of Alexandria begins *in medias res*, with not much explanation regarding how a lowly shepherd is able to “rise to military and social preeminence” (Hyland 25-26). However, what we do understand from the text is that a peasant-turned-nobleman has adopted the guise of four different men in order to live in pursuit of pleasure, wealth, and power. He is simultaneously Irus (the blind beggar/seer), Leon (a moneylender), Duke Cleanethes (a warrior who the Queen loves, and who eventually becomes King of Egypt), and Count Hermes (a hotheaded Italian with an eye-patch). In addition to wooing and marrying two different Egyptian women in his guises as Leon and Count Hermes, he also fathers a child with each of these wives.\(^{22}\) In the end, he adopts permanently his primary identity of Duke Cleanethes and publically kills off his roles as Leon and Count Hermes (with the understanding he will most likely abandon his role as Irus, the blind beggar, as well), and gives his ex-wives in marriage to the kings of neighboring countries. He is seemingly rewarded for his “wit” and trickery by becoming the new king of Egypt — he receives no punishment or reprimand, only more wealth and power. In fact, his trickery is not suspected in the slightest throughout the entirety of the play.

In the course of the drama, the pro/antagonist’s self-identification as Duke Cleanethes becomes his primary centric identity, while in order to protect and fund this identity, he dons the semblances of his other false identities.\(^{23}\) Because Queen Ægiale has fallen in love with the powerful

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\(^{22}\) Elimine — the wife of Cleanethes’ alter ego Count Hermes — must beg for some accommodation “to mainetayne my state, / And this poore burthen which I goe withall. / The haplesse Infant of a haplesse father” after Count Hermes is presumed dead near the end of the play (1471-73). Likewise, Samathis — the wife of Cleanethes’ alter ego Leon — also requests aid since Leon’s death “left me much in debt, his creditors / Hauing seized all I haue into their handes / And turnd me with this haplesse burthen heere, / Into the streetes” (1476-79).

\(^{23}\) Here, I argue that the titular character must be classified as a man of nobility for although he briefly admits
Duke Cleanthes, King Ptolemy of Alexandria seeks his execution, but she convinces her husband instead to punish Cleanthes with banishment. His life spared, yet none the wiser, Duke Cleanthes assumes false identities in order to pursue pleasure and avoid pain all while remaining disguised in his country waiting for his opportunity to “claime the crowne” (128). That Duke Cleanthes has been Duke Cleanthes for the majority of his life is confirmed through the text of the play; he has lived in his disguise long enough for his role to no longer be a disguise, but rather his true identity. Duke Cleanthes, over a span of assumed years, has gained enough prestige and notoriety to establish his “silly brother” as the “Burgomaister of this rich [town] / With the great wealth, I haue bestowed on him” (140-142), to cause the Queen to fall desperately in love with him, and to establish his international reputation as the fearsome, “warlicke Duke Cleanthes, / Whose name [is] terror to…valiant troops” (1249-50). This primary identity is confirmed by external sources; the verification of his identity as Duke Cleanthes by the kings of every surrounding country only further

to having been peasant-born, the action of the play begins in medias res with his having already become a well-established gentleman. As has been discussed regarding the label of one as “disabled,” identity is socially-constructed. More generally in queer studies, personal identity has been argued as being confirmed temporally through repetitive daily practice (Butler, Gender Trouble) and also socially confirmed by external sources (Butler, Undoing Gender). In her argument regarding the social performativity of gender specifically, Judith Butler argues that identity is formed by societal response: “to be a body is to be given over to others even as a body is, emphatically, ‘one’s own’…we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimensions; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere” (Undoing Gender 20-21). Within the world of the play, the protagonist’s identity is confirmed in both these ways: through repetitive daily habit, he has established himself as Duke Cleanthes in practice, and through the statements of national and international monarchs, his identity as Cleanthes is further confirmed. The titular character is introduced as Duke Cleanthes, although his humble origins as a shepherd’s son are briefly mentioned: “See, Earth and Heaven, where her Cleanthes is. / I am Cleanthes and blind Irus too, / And more than these, as you shall soone perceave, / Yet but a shepheardes sonne at Memphis borne” (114-117). In this way, his guise as a ‘shepheardes sonne’ becomes one of many ‘more of these’ disguises. That Duke Cleanthes could be interpreted in any way as chiefly the ‘shepheardes sonne at Memphis borne’ is no longer a question; his original name is never given and his history is briefly passed over. The identity he assumes as the blind beggar and seer Irus is the only referential identity that recalls his true origins and the paternal training he underwent in the con-art of divination.

24 The text of The Blind Beggar of Alexandria is not divided into acts or scenes; therefore, citations refer specifically to line numbers.
establishes his primary identity through reiterations of his historical and intercultural renown. Because of this, the characterization of this man can be accurately described in terms of nobility.

Cleanthes’ most important alter ego, Irus, is also the titular blind beggar of Alexandria. Irus is universally considered wise and honest by all the characters in the play, and the complete trust shown Irus by every other character surrounding him becomes deeply ironic as Cleanthes uses this disability disguise as a method to manipulate situations for his own gain. In this way, Cleanthes becomes the epitome of what early modern society feared regarding false impairment. Cleanthes acquires wealthy donatives from appreciative nobles, who are confirmed in their desires through Irus’ false ‘foresight.’ Yet his identity as Irus is a means to an Epicurean end; to fund his chosen and preferred lifestyle as Duke Cleanthes and to experience carnal pleasure: “For till the time that I may claim the crown, / I mean to spend my time in sports of love” (128-29). Queen Ægiale’s, Samathis’, Elimine’s, and Martia’s utter conviction in his prophecies demonstrates that the people of Alexandria consider Irus’ word as law. While disguised as the blind beggar and seer, Cleanthes convinces two beautiful Egyptian women, Samathis and Elimine, to marry him in his disguises as Count Hermes and Leon, respectively. Cleanthes, disguised as Irus, means to prophecy that the women are destined to marry his alter-egos:

These are the nymphes of Alexandria…
With two of them at once am I in loue
Deepely and equally…
Now will I tell their fortunes so,
As may make way to both their loues at once;
The one as I am Leon the rich vserer [usurer],
The other as I am the mad brayne Count” (136-50).

The two women fully depend upon Irus’ visions, which are self-fulfilling due to the fact that he plays the roles of each suitor. In this way, Cleanthes is able to utilize his disguises to manipulate events for his own gain.
From the first Act, Irus’ pronouncements are further demonstrated as completely trustworthy, and this inclination of blind trust is confirmed in a later scene when Irus is called forward in a civil lawsuit as an oral witness to a business transaction. In this scene, the King hears the charges of Lord Antistenes, who accuses Leon (CLeanthes as the moneylender) of having wrongfully seized his estates. Leon’s rejoinder is that Antistenes did not repay a loan of four thousand pounds, and upon the default of this loan, Leon seizes his reparation by way of seizing Antistenes’ estate. Leon claims that Antistenes defaulted on his loan repayment in the hearing of Irus, the blind beggar: “Vpon the stone before blinde Irus caue…[he] promist payment of foure thousand pound, / If I would let him haue his statutes in…Some three months to come or thereaboutes” (727-33). Upon refusing this extension, Leon dishonestly claims Antistenes refused to repay any portion of the loan, “Which I refusing he repayde me none, / But parted in a rage and card [cared] not for me” (734-35). Leon then calls upon his witnesses, Count Hermes and Irus, thus doubly becoming his own character witness. After Count Hermes’ testimony is not quite believed, Irus is fetched as the definitive witness. Because Leon is considered avaricious and Count Hermes is considered capricious, Cleanthes’ role as Irus becomes indispensable for achieving his ends. In contrast to Cleanthes’ three other alter egos, Irus is considered a “holy beggar,” whose word is indisputable (793). Upon entering, Irus declares that his “holy prayers” have been disturbed and that by this interruption “the good of Ægypt is [likewise] disturbd” (815). Irus naturally confirms Leon’s and Count Hermes’ claims (as the three men are one and the same), and the King judges, “This holy man no doubt speakes what he hard [heard], / And I am sory for Antistenes” (840-41). Here, and throughout the play, Irus’ false blindness is interpreted as proof of honesty and foresight. In line with the Classical as well as Old Testament figure of the holy prophet whose physical blindness does
not impede his spiritual foresight, Irus is able to swindle the Egyptian people by guaranteeing the fruition of any prophecy through the actions of multiple alter egos.

Duke Cleanthes’ gains at the conclusion of the play are astronomical: after performing as the blind beggar and prophet, Irus, as well as taking up several other disguises – he ends up ostensibly rewarded after successfully performing all of them. He acquires wealth and marriage with the beautiful and wealthy Egyptian women Samathis and Elimine through his disguises as the moneylender Leon and the “mad-brain” Count Hermes. In the span of time wherein he is married to these women in separate disguises, Cleanthes attempts to seduce each wife while wearing the disguise of the other: dressed as Leon, he attempts to seduce Count Hermes’ wife (and vice versa). As if he were already bored by his ill-gotten but effortless gains, Cleanthes attempts the seduction of his wives as clearly nothing more than another game. For Samathis and Elimine, however, Cleanthes’ actions are detrimental. Both women disclose their mutual experiences, and it rattles both women with the legitimate fear that their respective husbands are unfaithful.

More than using these two women for pleasure, attempting to seduce them through other disguises, and fathering children with them; Cleanthes’ actions also threaten Samathis’ and Elimine’s livelihoods and potentially their lives. After seizing Samathis’ dowry for his own uses, Cleanthes as Leon fakes his own death, leaving Samathis and their infant child “much in debt”; this results in both Samathis and infant being turned out “Into the streetes” (1476, 1479). Furthermore, Cleanthes succeeds in marrying and collecting the dowry of another beautiful Egyptian woman, Elimine, through his disguise as Count Hermes. All of Elimine’s wealth and goods are seized by the previous king for Count Hermes’ “murder done, / Of young prince Doricles” (1469-70). By the close of the play, Cleanthes inherits the throne along with these previously seized goods and becomes the primary recipient of her wealth, even though it was Cleanthes himself who committed the murder as
Count Hermes. To give Cleanthes some credit, he says he will not leave his wives and children in their destitution:

> these my widowes here must not be left,
> vnto the mercie of the needy world,
> Nor mine owne Issue that they goe withall,
> Haue such base fortunes and their sire so great. (1490-93)

Interestingly enough, Cleanthes does not trust his “widowes” care at “the mercie of the needy world.” Resolving to dip into his now astronomically-increased treasury – that is the royal treasury that is now his by virtue of being king – Cleanthes declares that he will not only restore the wealth of these women but also arrange for their future marriages to two kings of neighboring countries:

> [To Elimine] The slaughter of the Count your husband madam,
> Shalbe remitted, and your selfe enjoy,
> The vtmost of the liuie he possest,
> [To Samathis] So will I pay your husband Leons debt,
> And both shall liue fitting there wonted states. (1496-1500)

Assuming then, perhaps, his most unbelievable disguise – that of a caring and dutiful husband and father – Cleanthes announces his intention to be a foster-father to his own biological children:

> Kings in there mercie come most neare the Goddes [gods],
> And can no better shew it then in ruth,
> Of widowes and of children fatherlesse.
> My selfe will therefore be to both your birthes
> A carefull father in there bringing vp. (1501-1505)

His seeming “care” for the women who he has manipulated to the utmost extent proves altogether vapid, for the wealth he gifts to them out of copious abundance was theirs by rights. His vow to care for his children is an empty promise, for in giving Samathis and Elimine in marriage to King Bion and King Porus, Cleanthes’ children ultimately become their new husbands’ wards. Furthermore, by

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25 The hesitancy and skepticism that Cleanthes implies here regarding charity may in fact be a reference to the contemporary legislation of early modern England that made it exceedingly difficult to be a recipient of public aid.
shipping his “widowes” out of Egypt with these foreign kings, Cleanthes covers his proverbial tracks by preventing any future discovery of his false identities.

It goes without saying that Cleanthes makes a habit of using everything (beautiful women, disguises, wealth, to name a few) in pursuit of his own pleasure. When something has surpassed its usefulness or threatens the achievement of Cleanthes’ pleasure, he casts it off without feeling any shame and without receiving any reproof. Thus, in all ways, Cleanthes’ reprehensible actions are not just unpunished, but rewarded; they are destined to be remembered fondly as nothing more than the “mad pranks I haue played” (1590). And true to form, the final lines of the play suggest that the lesson Cleanthes has learned is that as long as his sharp wit remains intact, he can use and abuse those around him for his own pleasure and gain:

let vs goe to frolicke in our Court.
Carousing free whole boules of greekish wine,
In honor of the conquest we haue made,
That at our banquet all the Gods may tend,
Plauding our victorie and this happie end. (1607-11)

Unbeknownst to any character but his own disguised Burgomaster, Cleanthes’ words carry ironic alternative significance. The characters must assume he is discussing Egypt’s recent military victory. However, to the audience and his confidant and Burgomaster, who understand the extent of Cleanthes’ true “conquest” and “victorie,” Cleanthes’ words denote his own game as a master of disguise and manipulator of women and broader society. Again, it is only through his disguise as Irus that Cleanthes is able to procure the successes of his various alter egos. He acquires wealth and influence through his disguise as the blind beggar/prophet Irus because the character’s disability is accounted to him as holiness. Without having first established credibility through this disguise of feigned impairment, Cleanthes would have been unable to collect the funds to become a moneylender, nor then adopt the lifestyles of wealthy noblemen. Furthermore, it is through this false
blindness and Cleanthes’ other disguises that he is able to take full advantage of each and every character in the play. By adopting multiple disguises and chiefly his disguise as a blind beggar and seer, the play’s protagonist ultimately acquires wealth, women, and unrivaled power through his primary identity as Duke Cleanthes, the identity through which he ultimately attains his new status as king of Egypt.

In addition to *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, both *Fair Em* and *The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green* perpetuate the same trend of rich rewards for witty disguises assumed by noble characters, although not quite to the same extent as seen in Chapman’s play. Within the course of Em’s deception, which is performed in an almost Biblical practice of purposed abstinence so that she will not appear unfaithful to Manville – “If sight [or hearing] do move offence, it is the better not to see [or hear]” (2.1) – Em loses the affection of both Manville and Mountney, two of the suitors who believe that she actually has become impaired. For Manville, who has a second lover and is hard-pressed to decide between the two women, it becomes a stroke of good luck: “Both blind and deaf! Then she is no wife for me; and glad / am I so good occasion is hapned: Now will I away to Chester, / and leave these gentlemen to their blind fortune” (2.4). However, in the end, Em’s false impairments become her glory when she avows that her deceits were forced by her utter devotion to Manville as an innocent way to dissuade the then unwanted advances of Mountney and Valingford. Upon hearing this confession, Manville attempts to regain Em’s affections and is violently rebuffed:

Lay off thy hands, disloyal as thou art!
Nor shalt thou have possession of my love,
That canst so finely shift thy matters off.
Put case I had been blind, and could not see--
As often times such visitations falls
That pleaseth God, which all things doth dispose--
Shouldest thou forsake me in regard of that?

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26 “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:29).
I tell thee Manville, hadst thou been blind,
Or deaf, or dumb, or else what impediments might
Befall to man, Em would have loved and kept,
And honoured thee: yea begged, if wealth had failed,
For thy relief. (5.1)

Because of her seemingly noble motivations, Em is rewarded with her successful marriage to another influential gentleman of William the Conqueror’s court: Valingford. Furthermore, she is accounted as honorable while the unfaithful Manville is disgraced. Finally both Fair Em and her father’s rightful rank (as a Duke) and riches are restored as they become reestablished in the favor of William I.

Likewise, in *The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green*, the exiled Momford pretends to be a blind beggar (and the blind beggar’s brother), and a traveling soldier in order to remain in England. Hyland argues that Chettle, Day, and Haughton’s *The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green*, “staged roughly three years after *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria,*” was meant to echo the title of Chapman’s popular play, signaling “to the audience that it could expect more of what it desired,” that is, the staging of multiple disguises (26). According to Hyland, “Not much is known about the performance history of this play, but it seems that the audience was not losing interest in the fashion, because Henslowe's records show that in 1601 William Haughton and John Day were paid to provide a sequel, and shortly after that payments were made for a second sequel, though neither of these is extant (qtd. in Hyland 26-27). At the beginning of *The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green*, Lord Momford is framed by his brother and his future son-in-law for treason. Both men, who are jealous of his position and wealth, forge a letter that connects him to England’s enemies in the war. Both men continue to feign loyalty to Momford and promise to care for his daughter while Momford lives his life, exiled from England. However, Momford chooses to don disguises in order to successfully live in England (despite his banishment), to be near his daughter, and to investigate the dispensation of his daughter’s
inheritance. Throughout the course of the play, Momford pretends to be a wandering soldier, a blind beggar living in Bednal Green, and a serving man (who is the supposed brother of the blind beggar). He soon discovers that the men he thought he could trust most are the reason for his demise, and he spends the rest of the play in pursuit of justice. In the end, his dissembling is treated as just and clever; he is cleared of all charges, placed back in the king’s favor and offered a distinguished promotion, and he gives his daughter in marriage to his loyal friend Captain Westford, a wealthy and respected knight in the English court, who then becomes promoted to General.

Although Momford affects poverty and blindness, he is actually a distinguished nobleman who has been framed for treason and who counterfeits his various roles. In dialogue given in Act Four, he relates his own confidence in his eventual receipt of justice and reward, despite his deception: “Our sum of honor in despight of guile / Shall brightly shine in England’s Hemisphere, / We have been clowded long, but mauger hate, / Truth will advance desert to honor’s state” (4.1950-53). Momford discovers while in disguise that the two men he trusted implicitly are the real reason for his fall from grace and banishment, so he spends the rest of the play attempting to right this wrong. At the conclusion of the play, his dissembling is treated as a just and clever measure to seek out justice. Momford is placed back in the king’s favor and is rewarded with the position as the Lord High-Treasurer. His false accusers are sentenced to a “legal Tryal” (5.2623). Finally, his daughter is married off to the wealthy and loyal Captain Westford, who is further promoted to the position of “General / Of all our forces muster’d up ‘gainst France [sic]” (5.2638-39). Thus, the usually successful attempts to don disability as a disguise by gentlemen or gentlewomen in early modern drama – specifically witnessed in these plays – is lauded as cleverness rather than outright deceit, and the characters who feign disability are rewarded verbally as well as materially.
The Case against Disability Disguise among the Early Modern Poor

In contrast to ‘disability drag’ among the elite, the almost-always unsuccessful attempts at impersonated impairment by lower classes results in disgrace, punishment or imprisonment, and often exile. The failed attempts to feign impairment by lower-class characters can be interpreted in various ways: certainly, it seemed to be an attempt at quelling the commonly-held apprehension of early modern disabled bodies by placing the power of detection in the hands of upper class characters, but furthermore, the depictions of failed disability disguise seemed supportive of early modern advancement in the English Poor Laws. The recurring portrayal of deceptive disguises on the early modern stage by characters attempting to “con” naïve characters (such as Angelina in Shirley’s *The Sisters*), to rob willing donators of alms, or to simply increase their chances of actually receiving charity may have contributed to increased anxiety of the non-normate body. This would have further encouraged the dispensation of charity to be overseen by agents of the state, and not by individual citizens. This movement would have been reinforced by the general anxiety felt by early modern society toward the disabled because depicting feigned impairment in early modern popular media would have cast a shadow of doubt upon the accuracy of such labels as the “impotent” or “deserving poor.” Though the distribution of such labels would seem to justify the giving of alms, representatives in public office and notably religious officials nevertheless repeated warnings about the prevalence of crooks who only feigned disability to cheat the kind-hearted of their hard-earned money (*Dissembling Disability* 10-11). The early modern message was that while disability might truly be a condition meriting charity, simultaneously, rogues and cheats abounded and were feigning disability.

I have before demonstrated the early modern propensity for ministers to discuss poverty in terms of “idleness” or sloth. Such an equation overwrites moral judgment upon an economic
situation. Because of this critique linked to poverty, as well as the legislation of the English Poor Laws and the restructuring of Christian religious practice with Reformed tenets, beggars would have been hard-pressed to stimulate sympathy in the form of charity from early modern individuals. In order to be considered the “deserving poor” – those individuals licensed to beg who were also legally deigned worthy of charity – impaired individuals would necessarily have to be able to demonstrate their disability in a kind of show-and-tell that would make them stand out as more sympathetic than other beggars vying for alms. This same concept is explored by Tobin Siebers in “Disability as Masquerade,” wherein he relates the “masquerade” of amplified impairment as “passing” visibly as disabled, based on the societally-constructed interpretation of it (3). Siebers describes what he terms the disability “masquerade” as follows: “The masquerade represents an alternative method of managing social stigma through disguise, one relying not on the imitation of a dominant social role but on the assumption of an identity marked as stigmatized, marginal, or inferior” (4). The language of queer studies utilized by Siebers can be uniquely applied to the discussion of sensory disability, for individuals who are deaf or blind do not often manifest their conditions physically as identity markers. Because then, as now, society expected certain behaviors from those categorized as “disabled,” to pass as “disabled,” a sensorily-impaired individual might have had to exaggerate their condition in order to conform to socially-constructed understandings of “true” impairment.

As several plays will indicate, and as this chapter has thus far attempted to prove, early modern society constructed an understanding of what disability not only meant, but also the way it should appear. Even if feigned, the disabilities presented on stage, in Fair Em for example, were representations of the ways able-bodied actors conceived of disability. Thus the actions and speech of dramatized characters became emblematic of a subjective perception of disability – further
informed or even completely shaped by their culture’s perspectives of disabilities. As far as early modern drama is concerned, it is almost certain that no spectator ever saw legitimate disability on-stage; however, they most certainly saw representations of disability in daily life. The theatre where the disabled or seemingly-disabled could “perform” their impairments for charity (as long as they were licensed) and where early modern society became spectators of such performances – as Row-Heyveld concludes – was on the city streets (*Dissembling Disability* 15). Because of this, spectators of early modern theatrical productions had only to mark and either confirm or deny the verisimilitude of the represented action of disability on-stage. The intrinsic show-and-tell built into the licensing of the deserving, impotent poor, the dramatic depictions of disability on the early modern stage, and the “masquerade” of disabilities on the streets in order to stimulate almsgiving must have compelled the truly disabled to exaggerate their impairments in such a way to garner more charity: “While the ‘masquerade’ may be a nearly universal experience of disability, in a world in which begging was a primary (if conflicted) form of poor relief, masquerade must have been a necessity” (*Dissembling Disability* 14). Thus, even for the legitimately impaired, such exaggeration – even done out of necessity – could be conflated with any able-bodied misrepresentations of ability calculated to trick well-meaning individuals into almsgiving. In early modern plays where beggars attempt to mislead potential alms-givers by exaggerating existing impairments or altogether feigning impairment, they receive severe punishments. The reoccurring trend of onstage revelations of false impairments among the begging poor followed by severe punishments and imprisonment would only further dissuade such behavior by early modern English citizens as well as justify the skepticism with which the early modern impaired were ostensibly greeted. As previously mentioned, the discovered attempts at feigned impairment in *The Sisters* is met with Antonio’s call for the beggars’
imprisonment. Early modern drama is littered with such examples that confirm this circular and self-fulfilling social construct regarding begging and disability.

One prominent early modern illustration of this reality is witnessed in Shakespeare’s 2 Henry VI (1591/1623). In the first scene of Act 2, the king, queen, and several members of his court are made aware of a supposed miracle that has occurred in the town of Saint Albans. The court proceeds to investigate this miracle; whereupon the pilgrim Simpcox attests to having experienced not only profound blindness from birth, but also a miraculous cure of the same at the shrine of Saint Albans. Both Simone Chess and Row-Heyveld touch upon this false miracle in their respective works, describing the means by which the Earl of Gloucester is able to logically deduce Simpcox’s deceit. Simply put, Gloucester asks a series of questions and realizes that Simpcox’s ability to correctly designate different colors with their assigned names proves that he is lying.27 Whereas Chess’s interpretation of the scene focuses on what she sees as an early modern fascination with the lived experience of disability, Row-Heyveld’s analysis primarily reinforces her cumulative arguments regarding the heightened distrust of the early modern impaired body – a reading which I also see taking place in the scene.28 The existence of a descriptive list of twenty-four orders of rogues and tricksters that were known to prey on the unsuspecting English public in Thomas Harman’s 1566 pamphlet, the Caueat for Commen Cursetors, further reinforces the existence of disability paranoia.

27 Regarding this account, Chess notes: “As a fraudulent blind person, Simpcox’s choice to be cured of his ‘blindness’ hinges upon a fascination the sighted have with imagining what blindness, or living with a disability more broadly, is like” (110). She bases this argument on the fact that “The overrepetition of the word ‘blind’ and focus on Simpcox’s ostensibly congenital blindness reveals this fascination with difference; Gloucester’s questions, then, reflect early modern questions about the way that blind people might experience the world” (Chess 110).

28 See Row-Heyveld’s “‘The lying’st knave in Christendom’: The Development of Disability in the False Miracle of St. Alban’s,” which appears in Disability Studies Quarterly.
Needless to say, in 2 Henry VI, Simpcox is not a gentleman, and so consequently he is chastised for his miscarried attempts at disguise. He is both ridiculed and chased offstage by the Beadle as Henry’s companions and the townspeople jeer at the “miracle!” of Simpcox’s regained sight and mobility. His obvious ability to walk – though he had also attested to lameness – is satirized after the Beadle strikes him with his club, causing Simpcox to dart away, lest he continue to be beaten. Although Simpcox’s wife pleads for mercy on the grounds that the pretense was done “for pure need,” Gloucester still responds: “Let them be whipped through every market-town, till / they come to Berwick, from whence they came” (2.1.151-52). Their punishment, as pronounced by Gloucester, is backed by the scorn and ridiculing laughter of Henry and his court – “It made me laugh to see the villain run,” says Queen Margaret.29 Ignoring the very real possibility that Simpcox’s wife may have been telling the truth – that in a state of near-starvation, necessity forced Simpcox to extremes – instead the scene makes a mockery of the couple and their failed attempts at fooling royalty. Following the mocking punishment of Simpcox and his wife, the two are whipped and driven back to Berwick, a punishment which would have aligned with the dictate of the English Poor Law, contemporary with the audience of the play. That is, vagrants, unlicensed beggars, and other such knaves would be severely punished and then returned to the place of their birth. But in more than reinforcing the soundness of the English Poor Laws to Shakespeare’s audience, the scene also functions as a means by which audiences might explore their own perceptions of the lived experience of sensory disability.

29 Regarding the mocking of impairments, which was also frequent in early modern drama, David M. Turner argues that the feigning of disability might have very well justified the scorning of it in the minds of early modern individuals: “If authors of conduct literature questioned the ‘scornful’ treatment of the unfortunate in jests, concerns about the veracity of impairments displayed by disabled beggars—which in turn raised questions about the ‘truth’ of all bodily infirmities—appeared to justify some of the cruelest humor at the expense of the impaired” (65). Turner also notes that there was a decline in the belief that disabilities or poverty was an “ennobling condition” during the Reformation, which would only justify the mocking of it (“Disability Humor and the Meanings of Impairment” 65).
The early modern play that most helpfully juxtaposes the early modern perceptions of sensory disability from both an upper and lower-class mentality is Fletcher and Massinger’s *Beggars Bush* (1622) because the play showcases the consequences for disability disguises attempted by both nobles and real beggars.³⁰ *Beggars Bush* follows Gerrard, Earl of Flanders, who has been living in disguise as a beggar for seven years after being usurped by his general, Wolfort. In his disguise as the beggar Clause, Gerrard becomes the King of the Beggars and holds his position of power over a commune of beggars and thieves.³¹ Because of the coup, Gerrard’s children are also forced to live in disguise. Gerrard’s son, Florez, is in disguise as the merchant Goswin (under this disguise, he has wooed Gertrude – who is actually his betrothed, Bertha – the daughter of the Duke of Brabant). Gerrard’s daughter, Jacqueline, is also in disguise as a mad beggar. Near the beginning of the play, Hubert (a friend to Gerrard and the betrothed of Gerrard’s daughter Jacqueline) reveals the treachery that Wolfort has committed and further intimates his loyalty to the rightful Earl, Gerrard. His chastisement at first functions as a corrective that makes Wolfort crave repentance and a righting of his wrong. He commissions Hubert to find Gerrard and his children to beg their safe return. However, the action of the play later reveals that Wolfort secretly commissioned Hemskirke (a gentleman in the false Earl’s court) to murder not only the royal family once they are found, but also Hubert. At the conclusion of the play all is set to rights as Hubert discovers Gerrard and his children, and the three are restored to their positions of power. Throughout the course of the

³⁰ According to Rosemary Gaby, “Its first recorded performance was at court in 1622…but [the play] may have been written as early as 1612” (404).

³¹ The depiction of this veritable den of thieves and scoundrels, ruled by the King of the Beggars, put to pen the early modern belief (arising from the Elizabethan era) that “Elaborate hierarchies of positions, rules, power and deference allegedly co-ordinated much criminal behaviour” and that “criminal groups were said to be horizontally linked in regional and even nationwide operations. The metaphor of the fraternity invited the interpretation of a criminal conspiracy” (Aydelotte; Judges; and Salgado qtd. in McMullan 254). That the majority of the thieves sojourn to England to continue their tricks further corroborates this nationally-held suspicion.
drama, the perceived understanding of how disabilities are performed – that is, the way that impairment should look, according to popular conceptions – is revealed through the speech and actions of the Earl of Flanders as well as the feigned disabilities performed by his fellow beggars. Gerrard/Clause (both the rightful Earl of Flanders and the elected King of the Beggars) pretends to be at various scenes both a crippled beggar and a blind one; Ferret and Ginks (both Lords in disguise who remained loyal to Gerrard and followed him into beggary) assume the guises of the “Blind, and lame,” and Ginks specifically pretends to be a deaf-mute (3.1); Higgen (a fellow beggar) is a self-proclaimed Dommerer (a sham deaf-mute) but also performs as a Stammerer, or an individual with a false stutter (2.1.3); and Jacqueline (the Earl’s daughter) feigns madness.

In several scenes, the nobles and the true beggars all state rules and directions for successful begging; much of their advice concerns exaggerated feigned impairment, which again reveals popular opinions of beggars as generally deceitful. A description of the motley crew, by the beggar Prigg speaks to a collection of “crutches, wooden legs, false bellyes, / Forc’d eyes and teeth, with...dead arms” (2.1). The drawn out description of these tools for disguise suggests the lengths to which beggars are perceivably understood to stoop in order to garner alms. Further, the “common phrase of begging” gesturing toward the demonstrated guile of professional begging is announced by the noble Gerrard/Clause and corroborated by the true beggar Higgen:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Gerrard/Clause.} & \\
& \text{keep a-foot The humble...} \\
& \text{Lest men discover us.} \\
\text{Higgen.} & \\
& \text{Yes; and cry sometimes,} \\
& \text{To move compassion:} \\
& \text{Sir, there is a table,} \\
& \text{That doth command all these things, and enjoyns ‘em,} \\
& \text{Be perfect in their crutches, their feign’d plaisters,} \\
& \text{And their torn pass-ports, with the ways to stammer,} \\
& \text{And to be dumb, and deaf, and blind. (2.1)}
\end{align*}
\]
After the beggars are advised to be careful in utilizing their deceits to prompt compassion, Hubert and Hemskirke enter the scene, and Prigg quickly orders for all the beggars to assume their disguises: “To your postures: arm” (2.1). All of the beggars then proceed to beg, including the nobles-in-disguise, Gerrard, Ferret, Ginks, and Jacqueline. It is important to note that the interaction of the seven beggars with Hubert and Hemskirke strongly reinforces the medieval conceptions of charitable giving under the Catholic worldview. Although the setting of the play does not necessarily denote the worldview for the characters, the play is nonetheless situated in Flanders where the only tolerated religion in the seventeenth-century was Catholicism.\footnote{Belgium is located in the southern part of what were historically considered the “Low Countries.” As Jan Bloemendal observes in her article, “Religion and Latin Drama in the Early Modern Low Countries,” after the Fall of Antwerp in 1585 the country was “re-catholicized,” and the Counter-Reformation was militantly observed (542).} This scene merits quotation at length, for it mimics what such an exchange might have looked like in a medieval social setting, where Catholicism was still the practiced religion:

- **Prigg.** To your postures; arm.
- **Hubert.** Yonder’s the Town: I see it.
- **Hemskirke.** There’s our danger Indeed afore us, if our shadows save not.
- **Higgen.** Bless your good Worships.
- **Ferret.** One small piece of mony.
- **Prigg.** Amongst us all poor wretches.
- **Clause.** Blind, and lame.
- **Ginks.** For his sake that gives all.
- **Higgen.** Pitifull Worships.
- **Snap.** One little doyt.

Enter Jaconin. [sic]

- **Jaconin.** King, by your leave, where are you?
- **Ferret.** To buy a little bread.
- **Higgen.** To feed so many Mouths, as will ever pray for you.
- **Prigg.** Here be seven of us.
- **Higgen.** Seven, good Master, O remember seven, Seven blessings.
- **Ferret.** Remember, gentle Worship.
- **Higgen.** ‘Gainst seven deadly sins.
- **Prigg.** And seven sleepers.
- **Higgen.** If they be hard of heart, and will give nothing— Alas, we had not a charity this three dayes.
Here and throughout the play, the begging for charity more often than not results in charitable
dispensation by the characters Florez (the Earl’s son) and Hubert, both men who are described as
incredibly virtuous men. The play itself, written in early modern England, reinforces skepticism in
response to disabled poor because the scenes that occur behind closed doors (among the beggars
themselves) verifies the suspicion that all of the beggars are dissimulating impairment and are in fact
extraordinarily wealthy after decades of swindling. Thus here, and in every scene where the beggars
can do-gooders out of their money, the Catholic almsgivers are the objects of ridicule as much as
they become object lessons for early modern English spectators who are taught by example to
withhold spontaneous charity.

The understood religious and social pressures attached to begging are heavily utilized by the
beggars, including understood poverty and starvation, disability (“Blind, and lame”), religious
imperative (“For his sake that gives all”), pity, the blessings and prayers given by the poor and
afforded by the rich (“Heaven reward you. / Lord reward you. / The Prince of pity bless thee”). It is
important to note, furthermore, that the one character that finds it necessary to emphasize the
appearance of the beggars’ impairments during the course of the interaction is Clause (the disguised
Earl, Gerrard). Here Gerrard/Clause highlights disability – which he utilizes himself in his disguise
for he seemingly believes that his disguise as a beggar is not complete without donning a disability as
well – and later he gives his own philosophy of what begging is or what it should be when he gives a
prodigious sum of money to his son, Florez, whose disguise as a merchant has landed him in the
extreme debt of 100,000 crowns. Florez, who is waiting for the arrival of the ships carrying his
wares, doubts the legitimacy of Gerrard/Clause’s offering, to which Clause rejoins:

*Hubert.* There’s amongst you all.
*Ferret.* Heaven reward you.
*Prigg.* Lord reward you.
*Higgen.* The Prince of pity bless thee. (2.1)
Fear not, you have it by as honest means  
As though your father gave it: Sir, you know not  
To what a mass, the little we get daily,  
Mounts in seven years; we beg it for Heavens charity,  
And to the same good we are bound to render it. (4.1)

Thus, the opinion of the Earl represented in the play, carries the insinuation that begging is an extremely profitable occupation and that most beggars have so much wealth that their begging becomes a matter of unnecessary accumulation of riches, perhaps performed for the sheer entertainment derived from trickery. However, the Earl’s statement also reveals another potential upper-class conception regarding the nature of alms: ‘we beg…for Heavens charity, / And to the same good we are bound to render it’ (4.1). In other words, the play seems to demonstrate that the riches of the wealthy, bestowed upon the poor, still by rights belong to the wealthy and can potentially be reclaimed. For the alms given by Florez and other benevolent upper-class individuals is ultimately received again by Florez. However, in line with a more religious conception, one might argue that mercy or charity is returned sevenfold to the merciful. Because of his role as the King of the Beggars, Gerrard/Clause orders the huge sum to be given to Florez, and Higgen and Prigg remain silent during the gifting; however, they later reveal the hope that their money will be returned with interest: “Higgen. By the mass a royal Merchant, Gold by the handful, here will be sport soon, Prig. / Prigg. It partly seems so, and here will I be in a trice” (4.3).

The act of duping those foolish enough to give charitably is only one means by which the play seems to discourage the act of almsgiving; another prominent discouragement to sympathy in the play resides in its depiction of a utopic beggars’ commonwealth. In Rosemary Gaby’s study of vagabonds and commonwealths in early modern drama, she emphasizes the idealization of the beggars’ society in Beggars Bush. The vagabond court ruled by Gerrard/Clause is “worlds away from the real cruelties of vagabond life…These beggars seem to be constantly celebrating the advantages
of beggary. Their society is held up before us as some kind of utopia where poverty is no longer a misfortune, but rather a passport to freedom from care” (Gaby 407). Songs and revelry are interspersed in the scenes at Beggars Bush, which “contribute to an atmosphere of carefree gaiety, providing relief from tension and creating a sense of holiday” (Gaby 407). Because of this unrealistic depiction of vagabond living in a rural setting, early modern theatregoers in London might have entertained a false conception of poverty and its consequences. After all, it’s quite clear in the play that “poverty is no disaster. Instead it is strongly associated with freedom: freedom from care, from tyranny, and from all ordinary restraints” (Gaby 407). With such depictions of poverty and false disability reinforcing societal stigmas and perpetuating anxiety toward charitable sympathy, one might be left with the question: why ought I give to an able-bodied or impaired beggar when (1) they are most likely falsifying their poverty and impediment, and (2) their lives are not so terrible after all?

In this play, as elsewhere, impersonated impairment by the upper class and/or nobility could be read almost as a kind of religious penance meriting extreme reward. Their “donning” of disability becomes a self-imposed punishment as they simultaneously “don” the public condemnation that is inextricably linked with disability. This assertion aligns with the Catholic and Protestant proclivity to elevate “their condition of judicially inflicted pain to a state of spiritual transcendence” – in line with the wider western tradition of sometimes viewing a “physically marked and violated body [as representing] a highly charged zone of contradiction and paradox: [that it]…conveys the ultimate state of abjection and revulsion, [while at the same time] it is also honored through Christ’s wounds” (Covington 14). Thus, backed by the religious, if not paradoxical, belief that suffering can be synonymous with moral rectitude, the deceiving elite are recognized for their cleverness and rewarded with riches and power following their social experimentation. In the case of the previously discussed plays, most of the elite characters who don disability do so because of enforced
banishment; thus, their social suffering while in such disguises becomes incorporated under their broader “judicially inflicted pain” (Covington 14).

At the close of *Beggars Bush*, Gerrard, Jacqueline, Ferret, and Ginks (who remain unnamed noblemen) are restored to their former positions of power and wealth. The rightful Earl, Gerrard discloses his opinion of the beggars once and for all. His view of professional begging echoes the early modern English political views toward the “deserving poor” and the importance of industry allocated for the “sturdy poor”:

> though their [the beggars’] trade, and course of life  
> Be not so perfect, but it may be better'd,  
> Have yet us’d me with courtesy, and been true  
> Subjects unto me, while I was their King,  
> A place I know not well how to resign,  
> Nor unto whom: But this I will entreat  
> Your grace [Florez], command them follow you to *Bruges*;  
> Where I will take the care on me, to find  
> Some manly, and more profitable course  
> To fit them, as a part of the Republique. (5.2)

Whereas Gerrard and the other courtiers, after a successful practice of seven-years of deception, are elevated to their previous ranks, the true beggars of Beggars’ Bush are not rewarded so much as forced to relinquish their visibly-diverting and preferred practice of knavery for a more industrious occupation. The offer of a “more profitable course” is a merciful indulgence offered by Gerrard that the beggars refuse. Rather than accept this allotted fate, they determine to escape Flanders to “seek Some safer shelter, in some other Climat” where they might continue to practice their demonstrably profitable occupation of begging and stealing (5.2). In so doing, the beggars represent and confirm early modern stereotypes that the “sturdy poor” were slothful and stubbornly sought to avoid any virtuous occupation. The dialogue that occurs between the beggars after the elite characters have

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33 Act III, scene i demonstrates that the beggars are as likely to beg and perform for money as they are to steal it, for Prigg and Higgen take turns picking the pockets of several Boors while they are distracted by ale and the antics of the other beggars.
exited the scene emphasizes the beggars’ attitudes toward the undesirable nature of work that they have been offered:

_Higgen._ Yes, to beat hemp, and be whipt twice a week,  
Or turn the wheel, for Crab the Rope-maker:  
Or learn to go along with him, his course;  
That’s a fine course now, I’ the common-wealth, Prig,  
What say you to it?

_Prigg._ It is the backwardst course, I know i’the world.

_Higgen._ Then Higgen will scarce thrive by it, You do conclude?

_Prigg._ ‘Faith hardly, very hardly.

_Higgen._ Troth I am partly of your mind, Prince Prig; And therefore farewel Flanders,  
Higgen will seek Some safer shelter, in some other Climat, With this his tatter’d Colony; Let me see Snap, Ferret, Prig, and Higgen, all are left O’ the true blood: what? shall we into England?

_Prigg._ Agreed.

Ironically, the land the beggars resolve to journey to is England, which speaks volumes regarding early modern English perceptions of begging as universally-recognized trickery. Furthermore, in this way, the play confirms the suspicion of a preponderance of cheats and tricksters in England migrated from foreign countries. Thus here, and throughout _Beggars Bush_, the dialogue and action reveal popular early modern conceptions of poverty and disability (often conflated into a shared state of being) by both the rich and the poor. Skepticism is metatheatrically draped over the seeming disabilities demonstrated by the beggars in the play, as every single disability in this play is fraudulent and the alms garnered from the well-meaning are revealed to be in gross abundance (much more than the beggars need, as the play suggests). _Beggars Bush_ by all accounts also proves itself as propagandistic in its Reformed rejection of the Catholic imperative for charity, which is depicted in the play as misguided if not foolish. Rather than perpetuating Catholic doctrines of charity, it ostensibly elevates the English Poor Laws, which regulated poverty, assigned licenses of merited poverty upon the “deserving poor,” and made the provision of the poor a matter of legislated social responsibility rather than an individualized religious obligation.
Conclusion

Early modern skepticism toward legitimate disability motivated the inevitable turn away from active charitable giving on an individual basis. As the clown, Swath, of The Beggar of Bednal Green announcements regarding the perceived profit in Momford’s blind begging (and more commonly the lack of opportunity for such profitable begging), “I know the reason of that [Momford flippantly giving away all of his money at the close of the play], he can beg more, and Begging / be so good an occupation” (4). Swath then laments his failure to start begging in his earlier years because at the present time of the play – falling contextually on the heels of the 1598 revised statute of the English Poor Laws when the 1572 Poor Law’s “enforcements [were made] more practicable” (Slack 11) – such practice became increasingly impossible. “[W]o’d I had been bound Apprentice to’t [begging] seven years ago,” says Swath, “there was somewhat to be got by it then, tis out of request now” (4). The lack of opportunity for unlicensed begging, enforced legally by the English Poor Laws, was also abetted by societal misgiving regarding the legitimate disability of the licensed impotent or “deserving poor.”

The implication of onstage disability representation for both spectators and the early modern sensorily-disabled was one of justifying the exaggeration of disability by the arguably well-meaning elite, punishing the use of false impairment by desperate beggars, validating the enforcement of more rigorous dictates in the Poor Laws, and generally casting doubt on the existence of legitimate disability as related to begging. The same religious conceptions of disability as divine punishment, cure, and metaphor – carried over from the Middle Ages into the sixteenth and seventeenth

35 In the abstract to her book project, Dissembling Disability, Row-Heyveld argues “On the stage, playwrights teased out stereotypes about the nonstandard body, specifically the popular notion that disability was always both deeply pitiful and, simultaneously, dangerously criminal and counterfeit. Fears of false disability, which surged during the English Reformation, demanded a policing of boundaries between able-bodied and disabled persons and inspired the first legal definition of disability in England.”
centuries – were also reified in published and performed plays. These depictions would have logically reinforced cultural and religious attitudes toward the disabled poor, ultimately resulting in a general attitude of skepticism and distrust toward the disabled poor.

The depiction of feigned impairment on stage more often than not went hand-in-hand with cultural commentary on class hierarchies in early modern England. Whereas this chapter focused on disingenuous disability, the following chapter will turn toward early modern representations of genuine disability. Keeping in mind the role that early modern religious attitudes played in disability representation, Chapter Three will analyze early modern plays wherein characters suffer forcible disfiguring through the spectacle of maiming as well as analyze plays where characters are depicted as experiencing authentic impairment. Though disability as a result of maiming will be addressed as consequent lived experience of impairment, this final theme will more strategically concern the works’ representations of what it means for one to experience disability.
CHAPTER THREE

THE REPRESENTATION OF AUTHENTIC IMPAIRMENT ON AND OFF THE EARLY MODERN STAGE

I may now go play; Jacob leadeth Isaac.
    But I never saw such a pretty knack,
How Jacob beguiled his father, how sleightly:
    Now I see it true, the blind eat many a fly!
I quaked once for fear, that Jacob would be caught,
    But, as hap was, he had his lesson well taught.
-Mido, *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*

Introduction

This chapter serves as a continued exploration of the ways that early modern literature depicts reformed perceptions of disability and reconfirms the inextricable link between the religious model of early modern disability and sociocultural and political responses to the same. However, this chapter contrasts with the prior on staged depictions of sensory disability through its exploration of authentically impaired characters in dramatic and nondramatic works. Whereas the impairments in the first are feigned and voluntary, the impairments in this chapter are meant to represent the experience of legitimate disability. In the previous chapter, I described several plays where characters of diverse social class put on the guise of sensory disability and analyzed the ways in which the donning of disability disguise impacted or reinforced cultural perceptions of not only sensory impairment but also of the disabled poor. The elite who feign disability were rewarded for their wit and convincing performances while the poor were caught, punished, and then used as dramatic examples to reinforce cultural lessons on charitable giving. The main moral being that a vast majority of visible impairments among the poor were fabricated and that individuals should rather
trust that the stipend gleaned from government taxation would adequately meet the needs of the “deserving poor.” Early modern drama seemed to only heighten the skepticism surrounding disability through the trope of false impairment by calling into question the legitimacy of outward-seeming disability. However, in addition to this trope of feigned disability, there were also a number of early modern plays with portrayals of authentic disability (wherein the characters themselves experience authentically impairment) that call for an examination of representation falling within that category.

The two themes coming to the forefront in this chapter are distinct but related, as one often leads to another. The first – “Forcible Disfiguring: the Spectacle of Maiming in Early Modern Drama” – analyzes plays in which characters are mutilated in a way that renders them sensorily impaired.¹ In the previous chapter we established a link between voluntary feigned disability and cunning among the elite where the process of disability disguise is treated as an ennobling condition that only heightens the repute of the elite who don impairment as a kind of disguise. In most sixteenth-century dramatic works with this trope, the donning of disability and poverty by elite characters is ultimately perceived in dramatic performances as a trial that should result in rewards and accolades. However, in this chapter, we see the condition of disability utilized instead in largely sixteenth-century drama as a symbolic form of judiciary punishment accompanying an extreme revocation of physical, political, and economic status. This forced mutilation only reinforced the

¹ Though the punishment of blinding was not practiced in the early modern era, the cutting off of criminals’ ears was carried out in early modern times for libel against the Crown, as described in the case of Prynne, Bastwick, and Burton, so that the punished might not “hear” nor reproduce defamation against their ruler. Because this punishment does not remove the capacity of hearing, it is only briefly mentioned for its symbolic capacity: “The executioner cut off his ears deep and close, in a cruel manner, with much effusion of blood, an artery being cut, as there was likewise of Dr Bastwick. Then Mr Prynne’s cheeks were seared with an iron made exceeding hot which done, the executioner cut off one of his ears and a piece of his cheek with it; then hacking the other ear almost off, he left it hanging and went down; but being called up again he cut it quite off” (Rushworth 293).
popular religious belief that sensory impairment was a manifested punishment. Furthermore, the condition of poverty forced upon maimed characters bolsters the previously discussed association of impairment with poverty because blinding was often simultaneously marked by a loss of political power and physical ability.

Maiming, and in these plays specifically the gouging out of eyes, is the event that leads to the depiction of Gloucester’s consequent disability on the stage. In addition to discussing characters that have been blinded, the second theme will also highlight characters that are depicted as naturally impaired, without having the condition forced upon them through the torture of captors. Therefore, though disability as a result of maiming will be addressed as consequent lived experience of impairment, this final theme (“a case of eyes [or ears]: Portrayals of Sensory Disability on the Early Modern Stage”) will more strategically concern the works’ representations of what it means for one to have experienced disability during the early modern era and particularly late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century England prior to the greater sectarian proliferation. In order to accomplish such analysis, I discuss the following plays wherein characters are meant to experience legitimate disability, either as a result of mutilation or as a condition of natural impairment: the anonymous The Historie of Jacob and Esau (1568), William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice (1600) and King Lear (1608), and George Ruggle’s Ignoramus (1615).

In addition to a discussion of authentic impairment in staged dramatic works, I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of two widely disseminated and popular nondramatic works: Philip Sidney’s The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia and Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene. An analysis of the

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2 In this chapter, I will not address with as much detail the punishments of having one’s ears or tongue removed; however, it must be noted that the removal of the tongue and the removal of ears carries the symbolic weight of rendering one a deaf-mute, even if the removal of ears did not necessarily deprive victims of their hearing in practice.
various responses to authentically impaired characters in dramatic and nondramatic works in the late sixteenth century indicates a continued trajectory of pejorative responses to debility and a general lack of unconventionally affirmative perceptions of the disabled.\(^3\) If popular portrayals of feigned disability in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and poetry worked to reify skepticism and distrust toward the disabled poor, depictions of legitimate disability onstage and in published works in the same era seemed to further dehumanize disability and encourage the mocking and manipulation of it.

**Forcible Disfiguring: the Spectacle of Maiming in Early Modern Drama**

The public spectacle of the Earl of Gloucester’s blinding upon the stage in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* coincedes with the evident early modern fixation on public torture and execution. Earlier works including the trope of blinding, which seemed to have influenced Shakespeare’s portrayal of Gloucester’s blinding in the plot of *King Lear*, speak to the popularity of public torture. One such example is Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*. Shakespeare’s adaptation of the subplot of the Paphlagonian king Sidney’s *Arcadia* deviates in several ways. In contrast to the inclusion of Gloucester’s blinding within the performance, the blinding of the Paphlagonian king in Sidney’s account is told *post facto*. Shakespeare chose to dramatize the blinding of Gloucester itself as well as to include the ramifications of Gloucester’s torture in the text proper.\(^4\) Because it is lacking detail in

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\(^3\) I place quotation marks around the term “authentically” to draw attention to a matter of production history: the reader should bear in mind that no representation of sensory impairment on the early modern stage was ever actually authentic. To my knowledge, there has never been an instance in early modern theatre where an sensorily-impaired actor was hired to play the role of a similarly impaired character. The only exception to this rule seems to occur with physical impairment, and particularly with the casting of individuals with dwarfism. After this first use of “authentic,” I will not longer use quotation marks around the word.

\(^4\) In answer to this long-held conundrum, Richard Strier argues that Shakespeare stages the violence so that his audience might find themselves morally agreeing with the objecting servant who stands against Gloucester’s torture and is subsequently killed for that treason (193). My response to Strier’s arguments will occur later in the text proper.
dialogue, one can only imagine the ways by which actors creatively rendered the agony of Gloucester. This creative presentation of a blinding as entertainment aligns with the medieval and early modern public spectacles of torture and execution as they fulfilled the function of macabre titillation.

The staging of the Earl of Gloucester’s blinding in performances of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* must have horrified Shakespeare’s contemporaries as much as it proves to shock modern audiences, since mutilating the eyes or the tongue of another individual was considered a felony in the early modern era.\(^5\) This seems almost contrary to reason when one considers that other bodily mutilations in the same era carried no such consequence and were often viewed as a kind of popular entertainment. Even as contemporaries seemed to view blinding as a barbaric punishment, the automatic consequence for theft in early modern England – death by hanging – was also severely criticized. In the personal correspondence of political theorist and humanist Thomas Starkey with Cardinal Pole, for instance, he protests, “Methink, to descend to this part, the order of our law also in the punishment of theft is over-strait, and faileth much from good civility. For with us for every little theft a man is by and by hanged without mercy or pity; which meseemeth is again[st] good nature and humanity, specially when they steal for necessity, without murder or manslaughter committed therein.”\(^6\) Furthermore, the very act of blinding another individual in the early modern era was unacceptable despite the fact that their society regularly practiced and witnessed unspeakably heinous torture and execution practices, such as hanging a man within an inch of life and removing him from the gallows only to have his four limbs drawn by horses, and his body disemboweled, quartered, and finally beheaded. Blinding, often accompanied with castration, *was* commonly used in

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England in the high Middle Ages as a juridical punishment, but only as an occasional consequence for theft or for treason against a monarch. However, as England approached the centuries that would mark the close of the Middle Ages, utilizing blinding and castration in place of execution was no longer the preferred practice. In fact, by 1543, cases of high treason in early modern England featured the more popular though not necessarily fatal torments of the rack and pressing as well as the decisively fatal punishment of beheading. In the Middle Ages, blinding and castration were preferred as punishment because this penalty would doubly render null any threat of future rebellion or theft yet still provide some means by which a man’s soul might be saved. However, by the reigns of the Tudors, the custom of blinding a thief to spare his soul was no longer practiced.

The symbolic significance of blinding corresponds with the popular Latin description of the process: “‘Blinding’ means ‘to make blind,’ and is rather a harmless word for that which the Latin texts of the early and high middle ages often call, ‘robbing the light from the eyes’ – ‘lumen oculorum privare,’ [or] in the vernacular texts of the late middle ages, ‘to break out, stick out, or rip out the eyes’” (Büttner 47). In describing further the movement in Anglo Norman society that preferred blinding to execution, “Buehrer-Thierry sees in this punishment yet another aspect: the leaders…are the sources and spenders of light, and the punishment of blinding emphasizes it. In addition, it emphasizes that the imperial ‘ministerium,’ the idea of an ‘imperial office,’ was a source of light, in combination with legitimacy and punishment by imperial power. Above all, the punishment lay in shutting the punished out from that light” (qtd. in Büttner 3). There is a longstanding association with truth and light: to understand the truth is to be illumined. It is because of this familiar connotation that a popular religious metaphorical interpretation of blindness was ignorance to the truth: “Blinding was also rich in symbolism, being associated with ignorance and sin. In particular, and of great relevance in this context of rebellion and broken trust, blindness was
associated with infidelity” (Evans 90). In relation to King Lear, Gloucester is expected to conform to the reality or truth of the situation of leadership in his country, and when he chooses to deviate from that reality, he is grievously punished. After Lear bequeaths his power to Regan and Goneril (and their respective husbands), Gloucester is expected to recognize their authority. Because he is blind to the illumination of truth – as Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall prefer to see it – Gloucester’s own light is snuffed out: if he will be figuratively blind, he must be made literally blind. In this way, “the use of ‘symbolic’ torture” “refer[s] to the nature of the crime” (Foucault 43-45).

Here, one must make the important distinction between violent forms of execution and the violence intrinsic in torture. Violent forms of execution were fundamentally spectacular given that the value in the violence was for the spectator since the punished person would die either way. Though perhaps politically excused as a condition of deserved punishment, the violence of torture and mutilation could be observed by crowds drawn to violence for its own sake, and the consequence of torture and mutilation was that the victims would be left disabled and forced to survive in a culture not kind to the disabled. In the case of traitors condemned to death, their deaths were often preceded by the tortures of drawing and quartering or other grisly methods of torture. In these cases, the viciousness of their tortures strongly dissuaded early modern spectators from attempting similar acts of treason. That torture and execution functioned as a popular public spectacle is reinforced by the gruesome detail included in religious texts, such as The Actes and Monuments by John Foxe. A popular example in this work is the account of Bishop John Hooper’s torture and execution, which is both extremely detailed and incredibly gruesome:

In the time of [the second reignited] fire, even as at the first flame, he prayed, saying mildly and not very loud, (but as one without pains,) “O Jesus, the Son of David, have mercy upon me, and receive my soul!” After the second was spent, he did wipe both his eyes with his hands, and beholding the people, he said with an indifferent loud voice, “For God’s love, good people, let me have more fire!” And all this while his nether parts did burn; for the faggots were so few, that the flame did not burn strongly at his upper parts. The third fire
was kindled within a while after, which was more extreme than the other two: and then the bladders of gunpowder brake, which did him small good, they were so placed, and the wind had such power...But when he was black in the mouth, and his tongue swollen, that he could not speak, yet his lips went till they were shrunk to the gums: and he knocked his breasts with his hands, until one of his arms fell off, and then knocked still with the other, what time the fat, water, and blood, dropped out at his fingers’ ends, until by renewing of the fire his strength was gone, and his hand did cleave fast, in knocking, to the iron upon his breast. So immediately, bowing forwards, he yielded up his spirit. Thus was he three quarters of an hour or more in the fire. (658)

The description of Hooper’s grisly death is much more detailed than Foxe needed to accomplish his main purpose to elevate the faith of Protestant martyrs under Catholic persecution; however, as Peter Lake posits in *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat*, the spectacle of the martyrs’ agonies in this work and executions in the public sphere could work as a societal cathartic purge of unrest and violence. In other words, the hostility that the early modern public might have felt toward their rulers could be acted out in front of them, slaking their thirst for violence. Furthermore, the detail within Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* helps to demonstrate the wickedness of the enemy in their bloodthirsty cruelty. Nonetheless, Foxe’s work was circulated with this and similar accounts, so that individuals might be able to experience or perhaps relive the spectacle. It well may be that the same fascination and appetite that led early modern crowds to public displays of torture and execution prompted Foxe to spare no details in the torturous deaths of those “martyrs.” Foxe’s accounts generally bookend grisly descriptions of torture and death with some kind of religious maxim and historical reference, as if to justify the horrific tortures and their descriptions themselves. According to Lake, this abrupt inclusion of a religious moral aligned with the broader early modern use of popular spaces and public performances – such as execution – as a medium for religious or political propaganda. However, the spectacles ultimately served to quench the early modern thirst for violent punishment.

If corporeal mutilation is utilized as an act of social correction, disability becomes a prime and symbolic punishment, aligning with the early modern religious conviction that the sensorily
disabled must be the victims of divine justice or wrath. In natural rather than supernatural terms, as the punished underwent torture and a loss of status at the hand of the state, sovereigns utilized torture in order to confirm their authority and guarantee the continuance of that authority through demonstrating “a certain mechanism of power…that not only did not hesitate to exert itself directly on bodies, but was exalted and strengthened by its visible manifestations” (Foucault 57). The justice doled out by the monarch – who under the system of absolute authority acted as God’s executive on earth – could be interpreted as a form of divine justice. Thus, utilizing the principles of macrocosmic relationships, enforced maiming resulting in either physical, sensory, or cognitive debility could be [mis]construed as another kind of divine retribution for lawlessness.

The spectacle of Gloucester’s blinding represents a kind of double spectacle in that it is performed within the world of the play (W₀) for the servants and torturers – to the delight of some and horror of others – as much as it is performed externally to satisfy the carnivalesque pleasure of the actual audience (W₀). As Groves iterates, “the onstage reaction to Gloucester’s pain ranges from the excitable satisfaction of Regan to the silent complicity of the servants who hold him” with “only one character daring openly to voice his opposition” (136). This character, the reader remembers, is also killed for his opposition. In the depiction of Gloucester’s blinding, Cornwall makes clear that he has no intention of executing Gloucester and chooses instead to punish him via torture, leaving him maimed. Similarly to the sensational role that torture preceding inevitable death played for early modern spectators of public punishment, the violence of torture and mutilation without an ultimate death perhaps served the purpose of satisfying the need for violence itself. As previously stated, this cathartic practice, described by Lake in The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat, may have

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7 For a description of Keir Elam’s semiotic formula for dramatic worlds, wherein he distinguishes between the world presented on the stage (W₀) and the real world of the audience, which exists outside of the theatre (W₀), see The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama.
been a means of purging unrest and moral depravity. In *King Lear*, the question of moral depravity and its association with Gloucester’s blinding is not so much insinuated as blatantly stated by Edgar when he suggests that “Gloucester’s sexual sin is the cause of his blindness in Act V” (Silverman Jr. 65):

> The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
> Make instruments to plague us:  
> The dark and vicious place where thee [Edmund] he got  
> Cost him his eyes. (5.3.170-173)

When the audience of *King Lear* is invited to observe the spectacles of Gloucester’s torture and banishment, along with the onlookers within the play itself, the same process of catharsis arguably takes place. To complete the process of public punishment, the presence of an audience as witnesses to torture is not so much optional as it is obligatory: “People were summoned as spectators: they were assembled to observe public exhibitions and *amendes honorables*…Not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes. Because they must be made to be afraid; but also because they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and because they must to a certain extent take part in it” (Foucault 58). In the same way that early modern audiences would take part in the public tortures and executions of criminals, early modern audiences to *King Lear* could be seen as participating in the torture of Gloucester. Cornwall and Regan in *King Lear* do not inspire sympathy, so the willing participation of the W₀ audience in the presentation of Gloucester’s blinding should not be interpreted as an endorsement for the play’s villains. However, the participation of the W₀ audience can be read as a recreation of early modern audiences of public executions as well as functioning as complicit consent for the torture’s existence within the play.

In *King Lear*, Cornwall’s motivations for blinding Gloucester are various, but among them are the opportunity for calculated cruelty, the practicality of rendering Gloucester ineffectual, and the chance to send Gloucester visibly demeaned from the castle as a warning for other would-be
The extremity of Gloucester’s punishment is recognized by Beatrice Groves, who states, “the interrogation and torture [of Gloucester] seem gratuitous because the questioners have nothing really to learn from the accused” (138). Yet, in both the blinding and arrest of Gloucester, he is treated as if he were a “dangerous ruffian” (Groves 138). Ultimately, Gloucester’s blinding is a punishment, and the text does not allow for an interpretation that sees the torture as anything but a severe, if excessive, reprimand by Gloucester’s superiors. Gloucester, in his rebellion against Regan (and her husband Cornwall) and Goneril (and her husband Albany), proves his loyalty to Lear by assisting in his safe delivery to Cordelia and her French army near Dover. He receives a letter relating the oncoming attack of the French army against Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall as an attempt to place Lear back in command of the country. Gloucester aids Lear, an action betraying his true allegiance, and he makes the mistake of revealing his secrets to Edmund, who immediately betrays him to Cornwall.

At the onset of Act 3, scene 7, following Edmund’s disclosure of Gloucester’s actions in exchange for a promised title, Regan enters with the demand, “Hang him [Gloucester] instantly” (3.7.4). Goneril’s foreboding sentence, “Pluck out his eyes,” betrays the violence that will be carried out by the conclusion of the scene (3.7.5). Although Goneril exits in pursuit of Lear before Gloucester enters the scene, her ominous pronouncement is the one Cornwall acts upon. Though Regan’s directive relates her desire for Gloucester to be swiftly executed for his betrayal, Cornwall states that personally slaying him would be a step outside of his legal authority:

Pinion him like a thief; bring him before us.
Though well we may not pass upon his life
Without the form of justice, yet our power
Shall do a court’sy to our wrath, which men
May blame but not control. (3.7.22-26)
There are several details worth mentioning in these few short lines. First, Gloucester is bound “like a thief” and thus directly associated with this particular kind of criminal. Beyond labeling Gloucester as a thief and justifying his cruelty on the premise of power, Cornwall demonstrates the ability to achieve a calculated emotional distance, which makes him all the “more menacing” (Groves 139). Cornwall reasons just how far he might inflict punishment without causing any undue political unrest, and his command strikes a delicate balance between leaning heavily upon the certainty of his own supremacy – for the violence committed is upon the high-ranking Earl of Gloucester – while at the same time recognizing the danger of execution without due process – “we may not pass upon his life / Without the form of justice” (3.7.23-24). In this passage Cornwall seems to suggest that his power would not protect him if he took the Earl of Gloucester’s life without trial, and he decides to blame his anger if met with disapproval. Cornwall claims that his “power” or authority will “do a court’sy to [his] wrath” (3.7.24-25). Cornwall’s “parading [of] his legalism,” according to Groves, is merely a façade or “veneer for his abuse of his victim” (139). His seeming justice simply functions as “a prelude to greater violence” (Groves 139). Certainly feeling “threatened” by the prospect of Lear’s potential return, Cornwall “legitimate[s his] use of violence” (Amussen 5) on the premise of his own authority as the Duke of Cornwall and the ruler of half of Lear’s original kingdom. Finally, the horrified reactions of Cornwall’s servants demonstrate the “tensions and conflicts” (Amussen 5) arising from Cornwall’s brand of tyranny. Each of these proofs corroborates Amussen’s description of the punishment practices symptomatic of the early modern era.

Unable to murder Gloucester for his treason, Cornwall proceeds to mutilate Gloucester by gouging out his eyes while Regan stands in support. It is important to note that the violence of

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8 Recognizing the historically-sanctioned punishment for theft preceding the early modern era allows readers to connect Cornwall’s speech with his intended punishment for Gloucester.
blinding Gloucester occurs after Gloucester has already confessed and is not necessary to compel him to admit the truth of his actions. Though he has been bound and threatened, Gloucester admits to his betrayal as well as his motivation with only the threat of violence (3.7.54-64). Therefore, the stamping out of Gloucester’s one eye followed by the plucking out of the other amid cries of anguish only seems to serve as a cathartic act of cruel vengeance on the part of Cornwall as Regan eagerly attends, a perverse witness who later murders the one servant who dares to oppose them. The callous event of Gloucester’s blinding causes Cornwall’s own servant to demonstrate more virtue and mercy than his master: “Hold your hand, my lord. / I have served [you] ever since I was a child, / But better service have I never done you / Than now to bid you hold” (3.7.71-74). In the famous scene, the servant draws his sword upon Cornwall, inciting a struggle that ultimately ends with both combatants’ deaths:

First Servant
   Oh, I am slain! My lord, yet have you one eye left
   To see some mischief on him. Oh!
   [He Dies.]
CORNWALL
   Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly!
   [He plucks out Gloucester's other eye.]
   Where is thy luster now? (3.7.80-83)

After stamping out one of Gloucester’s eyes, Cornwall is mortally wounded, yet not even this injury prevents him from seeking out the extent of his bloodthirsty vindictiveness.

The necessity of having a servant counsel his lord in ethical decision-making only serves to underscore Cornwall’s brutality. Richard Strier argues further that the servant’s Petit Treason is a matter of moral disobedience rather than political loyalty. In what he calls “one of the most remarkable and politically significant episodes in the play,” Strier argues that Shakespeare purposefully stages Gloucester’s blinding in order to categorically espouse the act of disobeying “Immoral commands and the wicked who will do anything,” regardless of position or privilege.
(199). The lack of sympathy in Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall only emphasizes the fact that, in the minds of these three royals, Gloucester has been dehumanized and his body has been reduced to the function of an object on which to assert both dominance and wrath. In fact, preceding Gloucester’s blinding, Cornwall states upon Edmund’s revelation of the letter, “True or false, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester” (3.5.14). In other words, Cornwall no longer recognizes Gloucester’s elite position and will no longer show him the respect due his rank. Gloucester’s privileged position as an earl would have naturally only passed to his heir through primogeniture upon his death, so by this premature bequeathing, Cornwall pronounces Gloucester as good as dead.

In blinding Gloucester, Cornwall effectively renders Gloucester’s outward form to match his sociological status – Gloucester’s rank having been removed with his wealth, he has become the lowliest of beggars, rendered dependent by his sensory disability. For the blinded (and often simultaneously castrated), their punishment permanently removed their independence and influence in both body and name. In his discussion of medieval punishment, Michael Evans confirms such powerlessness as a result of blinding and/or castration: “a punishment that inflicted such a disability was as effective as death in rendering a man incapable of fulfilling his role of leadership. Blinding and castration were often associated, as a punishment that both physically disabled the victim and prevented him procreating, thereby rendering him both politically and dynastically harmless” (Evans 89). The medieval practice of blinding and castrating traitors holds great significance in King Lear: after the aged Gloucester seeks the life of his legitimate heir and is betrayed by his bastard son, the hope of legitimately passing on his name and furthering his line has been cut off, as far as he knows. At the moment his title is seized and Gloucester is blinded and cast out, he has effectively been castrated because even if Gloucester were physically able to father more children, they would not pass on his previously held legacy.
In addition to its excessive cruelty, Gloucester’s punishment in the play confirms the historical function of blinding as an alternative to execution. In his study “The Punishment of Blinding and the Life of the Blind,” Jan Ulrich Büttner confirms:

To take the power of sight from someone means, first of all, making him in some ways helpless, and accordingly needy, as no other maiming does. To a certain degree, hewn off limbs can be replaced by prostheses, and the loss of…testicles, tongue, or nose instead produces limited restrictions. However, not to be able to see conspicuously marks the punished for all in a simultaneously large restriction of his freedom of movement. This kind of punishment should not only punish for the crime, but also it would be put into practice to prevent recidivism in cases of theft and robbery, assault, arson, rape, and murder. These are all offenses that, according to early medieval law texts, would on various occasions be met with the punishment of blinding. (47)

Because the act of blinding renders one permanently helpless in ways that loss of other limbs cannot duplicate (as Büttner argues), the action itself carries both a literal effect and political significance. The sheer and persistent viciousness displayed in Gloucester’s blinding brings to mind Foucault’s observations regarding the manner in which torture bears an understood level of cruelty as well as symbolism: “punishment does not fall upon the body indiscriminately or equally; it is calculated according to detailed rules [among other things, relating to]…the type of mutilation to be used” (34).

Gloucester’s specific punishment is not merely a matter of chance; rather, his blinding carries its own significance as the strategically appropriate punishment selected by his enemies to fit his crime. The type of mutilation used upon Gloucester demonstrates the utmost cruelty because his blinding does not end with a dignified death, which in this case could be seen as a mercy; rather, he must stumble through the rest of his life as a dependent stripped of his own physical ability and political influence.

Aligning with historical context, blinding as a mutilation technique often carried an element of political practicality: this is observable in King Lear. Gloucester’s blinding renders null whatever threat he might have inflicted or aid he might have given against Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall. If
the rulers felt any potential threat as a result of Gloucester’s loyalty to Lear, the blinding removes it. As a re-creation of historical practices of blinding, the act of Gloucester’s mutilation works as a political statement to discourage any future treason because his body becomes a signifier “emitting signs” in a political conversation (Foucault 25). Just as Foucault argues, the body of Gloucester – if it will serve a political as well as cathartic purpose – will be “a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (25-26). Gloucester’s blinding becomes a way for Cornwall, Regan, and Goneril to assert their authority because their “authority is communicated through the spectacle of the broken body of the victim” (Groves 137). In order to verify their absolute power, it becomes essential for Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall to subject Gloucester’s body to captivity, torture, and debasement by “bind[ing] him” to a chair and using his body as an object on which to inflict their wrath. Finally, they send Gloucester’s mutilated body out of their castle, where his body might symbolically function as an effective warning for other potential insurgents by “pin[ning] the public torture onto the crime itself” (Foucault 43). Within Foucault’s paradigm, blinding is a form of cruelty that functions particularly as a symbolic demonstration of authoritative domination: rendering the body itself (and in this case, the body of Gloucester) as a tool to be forcefully manipulated as a political statement of power. However, Cornwall’s apparent attempt to discourage any future rebellion produces the opposite effect, as is voiced by Regan in Act 4:

It was great ignorance, Gloucester’s eyes being out,
To let him live. Where he arrives, he moves
All hearts against us – and now, I think, is gone
In pity of his misery to dispatch his knighthed life,
Moreover to descry the strength o’th’ army. (4.4.9-13)

As previously stated, in an age where mutilation and executions were matters of public spectacle, blinding an individual was regarded as an unspeakable act of cruelty. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the servant, Albany, and – as we see from the quote – “All hearts” respond with
rebuke against the blinding of Gloucester and in approval of Gloucester’s actions, despite his clear treason. Regardless of the ultimate response that the people have to seeing Gloucester’s mutilation, the original motivation for Gloucester’s torture and expulsion remains. Ostensibly, Cornwall and Regan hoped to use Gloucester’s body to visibly depict his punishment and rescinded power so that Gloucester would continue to carry out his penalty as a “herald of his own condemnation” (Foucault 44). However, the unexpected consequence Regan identifies in this passage would be well known to Shakespeare’s audience, as this is precisely what Foxe capitalizes on in the Book of Martyrs. The gruesome acts of violence he chronicles were initially intended by the state to produce fear, but instead they became a source of strength for Protestant believers.

It’s important to reiterate that for the majority of early modern drama, the presentation of disability onstage goes hand in hand with the conception of poverty or destitution. The characters that either feign false impairment or experience “real” impairment in drama often experience a life of paucity simultaneously. In the case presented in King Lear, the revocation of Gloucester’s status as an earl is pronounced by Cornwall in Act 3, scene 5; his blinding occurs in Act 3, scene 7; and once his external state conforms to his sociopolitical status, he is then cast out as destitute in the moments following his mutilation. More than marking a change of state from physical ability to physical inability, Gloucester’s blindness becomes tantamount to poverty with the change in physical ability denoting the change in social status. After Gloucester’s eyes have been stamped and gouged out, Regan commands his expulsion: “Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell / His way to Dover” (3.7.93-94). It should be noted that when Gloucester is forcibly removed from his own gates, the casting out is further accompanied by Cornwall’s pronouncement: “Turn out that eyeless villain; throw this slave / Upon the dunghill” (emphasis mine, 3.7.95-96). Line 95 draws a strong correspondence between impairment, villainy, and social destitution, for Cornwall associates
Gloucester’s blindness as a marker of diminished status and also criminality when he refers to him as a “villain.” The quick succession of Cornwall’s orders lends confusion to the action in the scene; it initially seems as if Cornwall is further slandering Gloucester’s newfound state by not only calling him a villain but also calling him a “slave.” Yet recalling the death of his rebellious servant, readers then realize Cornwall means to discard both the body of Gloucester and the body of the dead servant at once. Thus, immediately following his doing away with Gloucester’s mutilated body, Cornwall orders the dead body of his servant to also be discarded “Upon the dunghill.” The close proximity of Cornwall’s orders, as his thoughts flit from one wounded victim to the next, helps to emphasize the seizure of Gloucester’s earldom. The added editorial stage direction (Exeunt SERVANTS with GLOUCESTER and First Servant’s body) supports Cornwall’s spoken directives and further indicates the connotation that both bodies seem to occupy the same space as so much rubbish suitable only for “a dunghill.” Thus, with Gloucester’s blinding and exile comes his demoted position as an outcast of little value, no more than a slave or beggar in Cornwall’s estimation.

When Edgar first sees Gloucester in his state of disability, led by an old man who had faithfully served his family, he exclaims, “But who comes here? / My father, poorly led? World, world, O world! / But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee, / Life would not yield to age” (emphasis mine, 4.1.9-12). Edgar refers to his father’s state as “poor” in the first quarto edition as

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9 The Q1, Q2, and the Folio hold divergent adjectives describing Gloucester’s condition: the first describes him as “parti-eyed” while the later versions describe him as “poorlie, leed” and “poorelie led,” respectively. Contemporary printings of Q1 (1608) and F1 (1623) follow this trend with the quarto text reading “parti-eyed” and folio text reading “poorly led” (Norton Shakespeare). According to the editors of the Oxford textual companion to Shakespeare, the authoritative quarto reading is “partie, eyd”; however, because as the companion admits the later printed versions of the quarto and the folio quickly adopted “poorly led” in both print and performance (as they claim, “from misreading of ‘partie, eyd’ as ‘poorie, led’”), I refer to “poorly led” as more reflective of the cultural imagination given its popularity as the more commonly performed version of the text. Furthermore, the quarto in the 3rd edition of the Norton Shakespeare reads “parti-eyed,” but the stage direction dictates Gloucester entering, “led by an OLD MAN,” whereas the folio edition that describes Gloucester in dialogue as “poorly led,” makes no such specification (“Enter GLOUCESTER and an OLD MAN”).
well as the first folio edition; to refer to his father as “poorly led” doubly denotes a state of indigence (the primary definition of the word “poor”) as well as a state of pitiable circumstance.

“Gloucester is now reduced to someone who must be ‘poorly led,’ writes Robert B. Pierce: “It is indecorous for [an earl] to be led by a pauper, but of course a blind man can never have human agency; he can only be the passive recipient of leading by someone sighted” (160). The irony of the situation is that Edgar himself, as he describes his father as “poorly led,” is nearly naked, coated in grime, and playing the role of the lunatic beggar “Mad Tom.” Nevertheless, it is Gloucester’s condition that is considered the one most deserving of pity. After his mutilation, Gloucester is rendered “harmless” by way of removing his independence and consequently revoking his continued access to wealth and status. He is forced out of doors and would be helpless but for the guiding hand of first an old man who used to serve him and then Edgar, who plays the part of Poor Tom who promises to lead him to Dover, for Gloucester “cannot see [his] way” (4.1.15):

GLOUCESTER
Dost thou know Dover?

EDGAR
Ay, master.

GLOUCESTER
There is a cliff, whose high and bending head
Looks firmly in the confinèd deep.
Bring me but to the very brim of it,
And I'll repair the misery thou dost bear
With something rich about me.
From that place I shall no leading need.

EDGAR
Give me thy arm. Poor Tom shall lead thee. (4.1.71-79)

Constrained by his blindness, Gloucester despairs and seeks to take his own life by throwing himself off of the cliffs of Dover. He determines to bequeath the very last remnant of his wealth upon Poor Tom to recompense him for his assistance. Even in his own suicide attempt, Gloucester is helpless and must depend upon an apparent madman to help him to achieve his end.
Gloucester’s new role of subservience and dependence represents an utter removal of independence or revolt, while aligns with the observations of Matthew Firth: “For the victim of a political or juridical mutilation blinding represents disempowerment. Deprived of their own political power, the blinded person surrenders their agency with their sight” (9). This is particularly emphasized in the account of King Lear, for after Gloucester’s blinding, he must rely entirely on the good mercies of those who would lead him. The relationship between Gloucester’s onstage representation of blindness with that of the actually impaired is one of verisimilitude; that is, Gloucester’s reduction to a state of exile and destitution corresponding with his blindness would have mirrored the same connection between disability and begging in the city streets. Thus in King Lear, impairment is gruesomely depicted as a punishment (macrocosmically linked, for an early modern audience, with the cultural acceptance of divine ordination) and is automatically inferred as a cause for poverty, reinforcing the early modern reality that impairment often led to a lack of livelihood for the majority.

“a case of eyes [or ears]”: Portrayals of Genuine Sensory Disability in Early Modern Drama

Several early modern plays portray a character whose sensory impairment is meant to be genuine and not feigned; in other words, though the actor playing the part is called upon to dissimulate disability, the character himself is meant to be seen as naturally impaired. The existence of such plays raises a series of questions: are the characteristics of and responses to authentic impairment treated the same as portrayals of false impairment? Do plays with authentic impairment similarly bolster cultural responses of skepticism to disability? Finally, how do such plays help contemporary readers and scholars better understand the lived experience of impairment in the early modern era? Scholars such as Simone Chess have begun to move beyond metaphor in the hopes of answering such questions by analyzing the lived experience of early modern individuals with
disabilities. Leaning upon the New Historical maxim where history and literature mutually influence each other, many scholars examine the poetry, prose, and drama of the period for their proofs. The lived experience of blindness in early modern literature is examined in Chess’s “Performing Blindness.” Though Chess certainly details common early modern metaphors of blindness, she notably delves further into the reception and distrust of blindness and disability in the era, and the contemporary fascination with the actual experience of blindness. Applying this approach, where the emphasis lies in attempting to understand what it means to live with impairment, to early modern disability studies is of primary concern in this section of the chapter.

Staged depictions of false disability vastly outnumber depictions of legitimate disability; however, within the fraction of early modern plays I discuss representing “true” sensory disability, the majority of responses are outspokenly pejorative. In the examined plays, only *King Lear* concretely elicits a character response of pity, sympathy, and mercy; at the same time, the play also includes overt responses of mockery and manipulation, which ultimately nullify any outstanding ethic of compassion. In every other dramatic example listed above, characters not only willingly mock the impaired on account of sensory impediments, but they also manipulate these impediments for amusement or gain. Perhaps more disturbingly, the reaction of other characters to instances of purposeful manipulation is largely one of approval. The existence of, and more importantly, the approval for exploiting the helpless for gain might have only furthered adverse societal responses toward the impaired already observed in dramatic examples with disability disguise.

**Early Modern Responses to Legitimate Disability as Represented Onstage:**

**Making a Mockery of Disability**

Throughout history, the interpretation of disability that garners the most attention and disgust is cases in which the impaired are subjects of blame for experiencing their impairments. Just
as inexcusable as blaming the impaired for an impairment is the mocking of the impaired because of an existing impairment. Nonetheless, as Büttner notes in his study of “The Punishment of Blinding and the Life of the Blind,” mocking the impaired has historically been all too common. In the article, he references a knight whose blindness is interpreted as a matter of scorn to his young wife:

    Whoever lost his eyesight in an honorable way in war was however not secure in the face of disparagement. At least in the literature, we more often encounter the figure of the “deceived blind person” as a target of mockery. In the eponymous Märe, a knight in poverty marries his beautiful daughter to a rich blind man. On their marriage night, this man notices that she is not a virgin and complains. She objects that his two [missing] eyes are the greater blemish. The blind man defends himself: the enemy had taken his eyes, and he earned in that way no deception; she countered that her injury was yet less to rebuke, because hers came from friends. (8)

It may seem outrageous for a modern reader that the new bride’s worth is valued in direct relation with her virginity; however, for contemporary readers of this tale, it would have been a reasonable matter of course. With this historical valuation in mind, the reader may then better understand and sympathize with the blind knight who has been deceived and is then mocked by his new bride, who “objects that his two [missing] eyes are [a] greater blemish [than her lost virginity]” (8). In much the same way that the blind knight is mocked for the fact of his blindness, in almost every one of the early modern plays examined in this chapter, sensory disability becomes a punch line for ridicule. However, for the sake of brevity, I will narrow my discussion to the plays King Lear, The Historie of Jacob and Esau, and The Merchant of Venice.

    A first example where an individual is mocked if only due to the fact that he suffers from a sensory impairment is Gloucester in Shakespeare’s King Lear. Here too, as will be discovered in my discussions of The Merchant of Venice and The Historie of Jacob and Esau, the uncensored reception of blindness comes from a quasi-clown who also figures as mad. In this case, Lear becomes enraged and eventually suffers a mental collapse due to his suffering and mistreatment at the hands of
Goneril and Regan. In Act 4, scene 5 of the folio, madness meets blindness and is not restrained by propriety or a sense of social conduct. In this scene, Lear plays the part of the Renaissance fool; he says what he will with impunity. In the case of the fool in *King Lear*, and nearly every clown-figure in Shakespeare’s corpus, readers are left wondering if the fool is actually mad or simply counterfeiting madness. However, with Lear, there is no question that his madness—though temporary—is authentic.

Both Gloucester and Edgar express heart-sick reactions to their king being brought low in madness before Gloucester appeals, “Dost thou know me?” (4.5.133). In response to this, Lear immediately jests, “I remember thine eyes well enough” before mocking the appearance of Gloucester’s gored and missing eyes: “Dost thou squiny / at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid!” (4.5.134-35). In these lines, not only does Lear jest that Gloucester’s missing eyes are “squinting” at him, but he then immediately makes an association between “blind Cupid” and “blind Gloucester.” Even if Lear does not recognize the probing accuracy of his own ridicule, the reader understands that Gloucester was as blind in his misguided love of Edmund as if he himself had been manipulated by Cupid. Gloucester has no chance to respond to Lear’s mockery, for Lear bounds from one maddened thought to the next as he repeatedly demands for Gloucester to “Read thou this challenge; mark but the / penning of it…Read” (4.5.135-40). Gloucester must excuse himself with a “case of eyes” before Lear relents (4.5.141). Affordances must of course be made in this scene, for while readers might read mockery by Shakespearean fools as social criticism cleverly veiled in the guise of madness, Lear’s mockery of Gloucester seems more clearly to stem from his mental

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10 In the quarto, Lear’s first statement after appearing before Edgar and Gloucester might reveal Shakespeare’s knowledge of the Norman punishment for circulating counterfeit coin. Lear’s statement, “No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the king himself” (4.6.85), seems to directly relate to Gloucester’s recent suffering, for the understood punishment for “coining” by moneys (as stated above) was blinding. In the folio, “coining” reads “crying” (4.4.85).
breakdown. However, even in his apparent madness, Lear experiences periods of lucidity. He is, as Edgar wisely describes, a man whose words demonstrate “matter and impertinency mixed” or “Reason in madness” (4.5.168-69).

Though Lear airs his mockery with no apparent restraint, he also as openly shares his thoughts on true wisdom and discernment, which he claims can be attained without physical sight. Lear’s first statements regarding Gloucester’s blindness transition to a synesthetic commentary on true enlightenment: “What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with / no eyes. Look with thine ears” (4.5.146-47). Gloucester’s response to Lear’s “you see how this world goes” (4.5.144) echoes Lear’s conflation of senses when he states that he is now uniquely able to “see it [the nature of the world] feelingly,” a condition forced upon him as much as the glaring truth of Edmund’s hatred contrasted by Edgar’s love and loyalty (5.6.144). In his final statements to Gloucester, Lear’s madness carries a measure of truth. Lear describes the injustice and hypocrisy of punishing the poor despite the universality of vice and depravity – such as the scourging of a prostitute by a man who “hotly lusts to use her in that kind” (4.5.156) – as well as observing how cries for impartial justice and mercy so often change depending on who stands under trial. Lear also pronounces that if Gloucester were to “Get thee glass eyes” (4.5.164), he would be able to discern as much as “a scurvy politician” by “seem[ing] / To see the things [he] dost not” (4.5.165-66). Here as in his first synesthetic conflation of hearing and sight, Lear pronounces that sight is no qualifier for discernment; in the characteristically sardonic tone carried throughout this exchange, Lear insinuates that moral and intellectual blindness is as universal as corruption.
Throughout *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*, Mido consistently represents a clown persona as he takes verbal advantage of Isaac’s blindness.\(^\text{11}\) Among his various responses, Mido seems appalled that blindness is an almost universal consequence of age, and that he himself may one day be blind:

> “Why, must I be blind too, if I be an old man? / How shall I grope the way, or who shall lead me then?” (1.4).

Of course Mido’s response carries an element of humor as his young age seems to impede his common sense. However, beyond this, the statement is noteworthy not only for the implication of universality lent to sensory impairment, but also in its argument for the necessity of a caretaker for the blind. In more than this scene, the characters raise the question of who should care for and guide Isaac. In the first Act, Rebecca states that it is a wife’s duty to care for her husband in this office:

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Isaac:    Well, come on, let us go.
Mido:    And who shall lead you? I?
Rebecca: No, it is my office as long as I am by.
        And I would all wives, as the world this day is,
        Would unto their husbands likewise do their office.
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As serious and practical as the consideration seems to be, throughout the play, Isaac’s utter helplessness is strongly emphasized. This, according to William John Silverman Jr., is reflective of an early modern response, for he writes that “The stereotype that the blind and aged were weak and dependent on others reaches well into the Renaissance” (49).

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\(^\text{11}\) This anonymous Elizabethan play relates the Old Testament story of the twin sons of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, found in Genesis. In the narrative, the struggle between the brothers begins in the womb (“the children struggled together within her”) and continues into their adulthood as they vie for their father’s blessing and the claim to the eldest birthright. Though Esau is the elder twin (and favored by his father), he is cheated out of his birthright and blessing through the deceptions of his mother Rebekah and his brother Jacob. Chapter 27 of Genesis tells of how Isaac directs Esau to prepare venison and receive his blessing; however, while Esau is hunting, Rebekah tells Jacob to disguise himself as Esau by donning Esau’s clothing and wearing goatskin so that Isaac mistakes the goats’ hair as Esau’s hairy skin. He is only able to successfully accomplish his deception because of Isaac’s blindness. After Jacob successfully supplants his elder brother, Esau arrives for his blessing only to discover his misfortune (Genesis 27). It is this tale that is dramatized in *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*. 

conversation about how to best care for Isaac is more reflective of Isaac’s weakness and
dependence than his caretakers’ sense of duty. Furthermore, any good intent implied in Rebecca’s
words is undercut by the comedy of Mido, as his response to Rebecca’s declaration of her wifely
“office” is to jest about how such uncharacteristic dutiful loyalty from any woman would incite all
married men to feign blindness: “Why, dame Rebecca, then all wedded men should be blind” (I.iv).
Mido seems to approach the topic of blindness from a standpoint of practicality as he considers
what his own life would be like while lacking the sense of sight. However, Mido’s general penchant
for jesting does not allow him to gravely consider the impairment for long. Rather, he uses
Rebecca’s dutiful caretaking of Isaac’s blindness as inspiration for another jest.

Mido’s second response to Isaac’s blindness is to mimic it; in fact, Mido eagerly admits in
front of both Isaac and Rebecca that he has at various times mimicked the manner in which Isaac
must grope around. This admission is particularly significant first because it showcases how Mido’s
actions brazenly “mock [Isaac] in his impediment.” Secondly, given the fact that this play precedes
the others discussed in this dissertation by almost thirty years, Mido’s admission verifies the first of
many early modern portrayals of counterfeit disability onstage. Moving beyond the physical comedy
written into this image of Mido’s counterfeiting, Chess argues that Mido’s mimicry contributes to
her own reading of the play as optimistic regarding the manageability of blindness in early modern
society through the aid of “good, responsible, adaptive assistance” (112). My own reading of the
play, and specifically of this scene, does not afford such an optimistic interpretation. For Mido’s
dialogue strongly suggests that he has allowed, and perhaps still allows, Isaac to struggle in his
blindness and chooses rather to withhold his own aid or assistance so that he may be given more of
an opportunity to observe Isaac’s blind wandering as a case study and more perfectly mimic his
mannerisms:
Mido: I trow, if I were blind, I could go well enou’,
I could grope the way thus, and go as I do now.
I have done so ere now both by day and by night,
As I see you grope the way, and have hit it right. (1.4)

Furthermore, Mido’s admission in front of Isaac indicates his unabashed mockery of Isaac, and Isaac’s submissive acceptance of this fact implies his lack of authority. Mido’s dialogue above suggests that the casted actor would exaggeratedly mimic the blind even as he described, “I could grope the way thus” and perhaps make another hyperbolic motion before then adding “and go as I do now.” Furthermore, Mido confesses his repeated performance of blindness, trying on the impairment as if it were a game or “childish knack”: “I have done so ere now both by day and by night.” Rather than guiding Isaac as he is supposed to do, he allows Isaac to “grope the way” to give him more opportunity to “hit [the semblance] right.”

More striking than Mido’s admittance of how he mocks Isaac’s blindness is Rebecca’s response: “Yea, sir boy, will ye play any such childish knack / As to counterfeit your blind master Isaac? / That is but to mock him for his impediment” (1.4). At this, Mido quickly backpedals: “Nay, I never did it in any such intent,” to which Rebecca continues to harangue him: “Nay, it is to tempt God, before thou have need, / Whereby thou may’st provoke him, in very deed, / With some great misfortune or plague to punish thee” (1.4). In this statement, Rebecca points to the continued conviction that wrongdoing elicits punishment, such as blindness or “some [other] great misfortune,” conferred upon the sinful by God himself. In this statement, Rebecca’s words point to the tendency to interpret impairments as manifested punishments for sin. Scared into submission only because he most likely believes the same, but not quite willing to completely disregard the usefulness of pretending blindness nor his aptitude for such mimicry, Mido exclaims, “I will never more do so, while I may see: / But against I be blind, I will be so perfit / That, though no man lead me, I will go at midnight” (1.4). Again, as if to excuse his past habit of mimicking his blind master,
Mido argues that in the event of his blindness, he will be able to live without hindrance, with or without anyone else’s assistance – an opportunity not afforded to others who experience vision loss with no warning.

This, and previous examples, underscore that while Mido views the nature of mimicking blindness as a practical skill that allows him to walk more adeptly in darkness, at the same time he does not shrink from poking fun at blindness and the social responses to it. Mido’s and even Rebecca’s dialogue in the previous scene underscores the “blemish” (to reference the words of the bride from Büttner’s article) that is blindness, for Mido reacts to blindness as if it is a disease, expressing horror at the possibility of contracting such an ailment as a consequence of aging. Furthermore, Rebecca threatens him with the same “blemish” should Mido continue to mimic his master (“it is to tempt God…thou may’st provoke him…With some great misfortune or plague to punish thee”); but in this, Rebecca’s words create a relationship of illogical absurdity. Rebecca chastises Mido for his mockery of Isaac, even as she seems to threaten him with blindness (the very impairment he has been pretending to have). Arguably, Rebecca’s response is much more problematic than Mido’s because while Mido might use Isaac’s blindness as a punch line for his own jesting, Rebecca’s dialogue perpetuates the common religious response of perceiving sensory impairment as a punishment for wrongdoing.

Even as it engages with the mocking of the impaired, *The Historie of Jacob and Esau* seems to be aware of its mockery. The dialogue in the play presents the very act of counterfeiting disability and makes judgment calls on the popular practice while ironically engaging in the same. Though Mido admits that he counterfeits Isaac’s groping and wandering around, which Rebecca claims is mocking and disrespectful behavior, Rebecca’s admonishment does not significantly alter Mido’s justification of the situation. He argues that there was a benefit to his mimicry because it would
make him a proficient blind man in the future. One must pause to consider the implications of Mido’s actions, Rebecca’s moralizing, and finally Mido’s justification of his actions because in this interaction we can observe a variety of conceivable societal responses built into the dialogue. Mido’s initial actions of mimicking Isaac’s imagined halting gait reinforces ways in which people onstage and off would fake similar impairments. Rebecca’s dialogue reveals a more conservative and sympathetic response not only to impairment, but also to the practice of counterfeiting impairment when she discourages it. Mido’s retort demonstrates the persistence of the counterfeiting trend as well as a possible defense of its perpetuation. Incorporating both of these characters’ lines creates a third potential response of unease or voyeurism. Utilizing the understanding of the vulnerability of the eye as well as commenting upon Garland Thomson’s observations regarding the uncanny identification one may have when impulsively staring at the impaired, Chess raises the following argument regarding the play itself:

In both early modern and contemporary contexts…the experience of watching Isaac negotiate his disability is perhaps instructive as well as voyeuristic. For the audience who stares at Isaac’s negotiations of the stage (as represented, perhaps, through Mido’s mimicry of Isaac’s way of walking), the experience of uneasy identification with a blind man is rendered even more powerful by the gradual realization that his disability is neither unique nor avoidable. (114)

Though both Mido and Rebecca are outspoken in their own opinions on impairment and the dissimulation of it, strangely enough (and perhaps importantly) the only authentically blind person on stage, Isaac, does not respond to either Mido’s or Rebecca’s dialogue after his first observation that “If the Lord have appointed thee [Mido] such old days to see, / He will also provide that shall be meet for thee” (1.4). Following this statement, Rebecca chastises Mido for his impersonations of Isaac (as well as Mido’s defense of it). Remaining mute on the subject of Mido’s mockery, Isaac changes the subject abruptly: “Now, wife, touching the purpose that I sought for you” (1.4). Only a few lines of dialogue occur between this abrupt statement and Isaac’s last line, so the reader must
assume that Isaac has heard the exchange. Isaac’s silence in itself speaks volumes regarding the
general lack of agency that the impaired continued to hold in the early modern era. We must
remember that even to receive government aid for disability, one had to be considered completely
helpless and unable to work in any capacity in order to be deemed “deserving”: Michael Dalton’s
1618 *The Country Justice* states explicitly that one category for the “deserving poor” be “The person
naturally disabled, either in wit, or member, as an Ideot, Lunatick, Blinde, Lame, &c. not being able to
worke” (emphasis mine, qtd. in *Dissembling Disability* 8). Denied even the right to ask for help via
government stipends for the poor unless they wore a billet indicating their worthiness, the disabled
poor in early modern England lived at the mercy (or lack thereof) of those in authority. The tension
between authority and helplessness is depicted in the relationship of Isaac with his family. Though
Isaac should be considered the authority (both over the house and in a discussion of blindness),
Rebecca and Mido disregard him. Isaac is admittedly cared for yet ironically overlooked; in this way,
his influence has been markedly diminished with his eyesight.\(^\text{12}\) It is because of Isaac’s specious
authority that Rebecca is confident to not only work her own manipulations secretly but also to
openly contend with Isaac’s will, causing Mido to remark on her defiance:

I have stood here all this while, list’n’ing, how you [Isaac]
And my dame Rebecca have been laying the law;
But she hath as quick answers as ever I saw.
Ye could not speak anything unto her so thick,
But she had her answer as ready and as quick. (1.4)

As occurs in the Biblical account, Isaac’s wife, son, and servants willingly lead Isaac deceptively into
giving away Esau’s birthright to the wrong son. Isaac’s lost authority is accentuated by Isaac’s

\(^\text{12}\) Again, one must remember in the patriarchal societies of both Old Testament Hebraic society but also in
early modern society that wives were expected to be both obedient to and respectful of their husbands, who
were considered microcosmic reflections of the supremacy of both God and their king.
comprehensive lack of independence throughout the plot and his ultimate defenselessness against the detrimental deception afforded by his visual impairment.

Similar to *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*, *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrates the trope of mocking the impaired simply because their impairment affords opportunities for mockery. Furthermore, in the play, Shakespeare’s dialogue suggests an awareness of the trope of countereiting disability in theatre, particularly when Launcelot the Clown seems to pretend blindness by not seeing Lorenzo (who stands before him):

```
LAUNCELOT
   Sola, sola! wo ha, ho! sola, sola!
LORENZO
   Who calls?
LAUNCELOT
   Sola! did you see Master Lorenzo?
   Master Lorenzo, sola, sola!
LORENZO
   Leave hallooing, man: here.
LAUNCELOT
   Sola! where? where?
LORENZO
   Here.
LAUNCELOT
   Tell him there’s a post come from my master,
   with his horn full of good news:
   my master will be here ere morning. (5.1.39-48)
```

Launcelot’s interaction with Lorenzo easily approaches the ridiculous, for in addition to being blind to Lorenzo’s presence, Launcelot is deaf to Lorenzo’s affirmation of his own identity. Instead of recognizing these facts, Launcelot instead perpetuates his tomfoolery by addressing Lorenzo as if he is another messenger who should “Tell him [Lorenzo] there’s a post come from my master” (5.1.46) and then promptly exits the stage. In this scene, Shakespeare arguably plays with the notion of blindness and deafness and the comedy that can derive from such misunderstandings.
Notwithstanding, the character speaking in this scene is not blind himself; rather, in a prior scene, we learn that it is in fact Launcelot’s father (Old Gobbo) who is authentically blind.

Launcelot, true to his role as the clown of the play, does not spare his father from his own antics, but takes full advantage of his father’s complete blindness:

Enter Old Gobbo, with a basket

Gobbo

Master young man, you, I pray you, which is the way to master Jew's?

Launcelot

[Aside] O heavens, this is my true-begotten father! who, being more than sand-blind, high-gravel blind, knows me not: I will try confusions with him. (emphasis mine, 2.2.28-32)

Launcelot’s “confusions” cover the gamut of giving false directions for the purpose of bewildering Old Gobbo to delivering the appalling (and fabricated) news that Old Gobbo’s son has died.

Throughout the entire interchange, Old Gobbo does not recognize the voice of his son, a misperception that Launcelot manipulates to its full extent:

Gobbo

Master young gentleman, I pray you, which is the way to master Jew's?

Launcelot

Turn up on your right hand at the next turning, but, at the next turning of all, on your left; marry, at the very next turning, turn of no hand, but turn down indirectly to the Jew's house.

Gobbo

By God's sonties, 'twill be a hard way to hit. (2.2.33-39)

One might be tempted to read Launcelot’s misdirection as characteristic of the buffoonery expected of a clown-figure rather than purposefully perplexing; however, his intention to “try confusions with [Old Gobbo]” is made clear in the prior line. Launcelot’s misdirection is purposeful, and it is also in direct opposition of the scriptural warning – “Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way” (Deuteronomy 27:18). Understandably, Launcelot’s indecipherable directions to Shylock’s house arouse complete befuddlement in Old Gobbo, to which he can only respond: “By God’s
sonties, ‘till be a hard way to hit” (2.2.39). Gobbo’s next line of questioning is to discover whether
the seeming stranger knows if Launcelot can be found at “the Jew’s house”:

GOBBO
Can
you tell me whether one Launcelot,
that dwells with him, dwell with him or no?

LAUNCELOT
Talk you of young Master Launcelot?
[Aside] Mark me now; now will I raise the waters. Talk you
of young Master Launcelot?
…
Ergo, Master Launcelot. Talk not of Master
Launcelot, father; for the young gentleman,
according to Fates and Destinies and such odd
sayings, the Sisters Three and such branches of
learning, is indeed deceased, or, as you would say
in plain terms, gone to heaven. (2.2.39-58)

Not content with simply dizzying Old Gobbo’s sense of direction and location, Launcelot must
distress his father beyond reason by testifying that Old Gobbo’s son (Launcelot himself) is dead. To
this, Old Gobbo can only cry out, “Marry, God forbid! the boy was the very staff of my / age, my
very prop” (2.2.59-60). It is this reference to Launcelot’s expected role as a help or “prop” that
incites Launcelot to reveal his true identity. Launcelot’s behavior as a clownish figure supersedes his
role as a son, for Launcelot does not indicate any guilt in his behavior but only stops his ruse when
he feels insulted by Gobbo’s continued ignorance at his true identity and his suggested role as a
chutch or “prop” to assist his father’s disability. However, Launcelot’s role as the proverbial boy who
cried wolf in this scene heightens Gobbo’s disbelief and his distrust of the still-unknown man before
him. Therefore, when Launcelot repeatedly asks, “Do you know me, father?” Gobbo first responds,
“Alack the day, I know you not, young gentleman” (2.2.63) and then confirms again just three lines
later, “Alack, sir, I am sand-blind; I know you not” (2.2.66). Further, Gobbo’s shock and concern
overshadow any other present problem, and despite Launcelot’s insistence on moving the
conversation from the topic of his presumed death to the revelation of his identity as the still-living Launcelot, Gobbo must entreat again, “but / I pray you, tell me: is my boy, God rest his soul, alive or dead?” (2.2.63-64). Frustrated and obviously unsympathetic to his own father’s distress, Launcelot then makes an *ad hominem* attack by mocking not only Gobbo’s blindness, but his intelligence: “Nay, indeed, if you had your eyes, you might fail of the knowing me: it is a wise father that knows his own child” (2.2.67-69). Of course in this statement, Launcelot insults Gobbo’s lack of wisdom because he has yet to recognize his own son. Gobbo attempts to recognize Launcelot through the sensation of touching his face; however, this test fails due to the fact that Launcelot has grown a beard since last he saw Gobbo. Because of this, it finally takes Launcelot’s naming of his mother (Margery) to convince Gobbo of his identity:

**G O B B O**

Her name is Margery, indeed. I’ll be sworn if thou be Lancelet, thou art mine own flesh and Lord worshipped might he be! what a beard hast thou got! thou hast got more hair on thy chin than Dobbin my fill-horse has on his tail.

... Lord, how art thou changed! (2.2.81-89)

Launcelot’s treatment of his father stands in stark contrast with the more sympathetic reactions of another son in Shakespeare’s corpus; that is, Gloucester’s son, Edgar. This example of Launcelot’s mockery might not seem particularly striking because of his role as the play’s clown; however, because of his simultaneous role as Gobbo’s son, his trickery appears all the more callous. Gobbo’s final statement, “Lord, how art thou changed!” might then lead the reader to question whether or not Gobbo is more shaken by his Launcelot’s attested change of appearance or his obvious lack of sympathy for his blind father.
Early Modern Responses to Legitimate Disability as Represented Onstage:

Manipulating the Impaired for Gain

Thus far, I have examined the several ways in which the living experience of sensory impairment is portrayed in early modern drama and the significant manner in which other characters in these plays have responded to impairment with minimal sympathy and more often mockery. What remains to be explored is the manipulation of the impaired for gain, a response surpassing mockery in its reprehensibility. This response to sensory disability perpetuates the negative interpretations described in the early modern religious model of disability. There are several noteworthy plays where impaired characters are not only mocked but also deliberately misled by the characters around them. It is vital to understand in this discussion that these scenes highlight characters who specifically contrive to manipulate the impaired simply because their impairments promise little hindrance to their manipulators’ desires. Just as I have focused on the most symbolically rich scenes and plays in my discussion of mocking reactions to impairment, I will narrow my discussion of the trope of manipulation to *Ignoramus* and *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*.

In George Ruggle’s *Ignoramus* (1615), the beautiful Rosabella is placed under the supervision of her maid Surda (who is also a “dwarf”) by Rosabella’s guardian Torcoll. Torcoll tells Surda to

13 In the comedy *Ignoramus*, an English gentleman named Theodorus promises his identical twin sons (Antonio and Anthonine) in marriage to the two daughters (Katherine and Isabella) of Dorothy, a gentlewoman of Bordeaux. Unbeknownst to Theodorus, Dorothy’s daughter Isabella was kidnapped by a Moor named Urtado and has been missing since childhood. Before he becomes aware of Isabella’s kidnapping, Theodorus had traveled with Antonio to Bordeaux and had left his wife and other son in London. When Antonio comes of age, Theodorus relates this history, and tells Antonio to travel to London and bring back the rest of his family. However, Antonio does not wish to leave because he has fallen in love with a young woman of Bordeaux named Rosabella (who is ultimately discovered as the kidnapped Isabella). Rosabella’s guardian, Torcoll, wishes to trade her in matrimony to the highest bidder (and in this case the bumbling lawyer from England, Ignoramus, offers the purchase price of £600). Torcoll charges the deaf dwarf Surda with guarding Rosabella from Antonio and all other suitors. However, the cunning Trico (the servant of Antonio) is able to not only contrive disguises for himself and Antonio to stay in Bordeaux and evade recognition, but he is also able to coach Antonio in how to successfully deceive Surda while Trico himself pretends to court Surda to distract her all the more. After increasingly ridiculous disguises and
prevent any suitors from courting Rosabella: “I have placed this little Dwarf Surda to be as a Spy over her, who although she hath been deaf these three Months, yet she is faithful, and understands by signes very exactly” (1.5). The text introduces Surda here as having been “extremely deaf” for only three months, presumably from age. The introduction of the Act reveals that Surda “understands all things by nature,” and the content of the play suggests further that Surda is able to lip-read and understands things by their appearance. Indeed, Surda’s dialogue clearly shows that she can speak; however, lacking any detail of the play’s performance and reception, we can only speculate as to how the actor would have voiced Surda’s dialogue. Therefore, though Surda is able to speak and can apparently read lips, she can also understand directions through gesture and miming. As stated previously, the text suggests Surda’s ability to read lips: at one point, Torcoll directs Surda to “be careful of what I told you,” but the dialogue is given with no stage directions for accompanying gesticulation. Surda also has full conversations with Rosa while presumably reading her lips. Though stage directions for gesticulation are missing in various instances; other stage directions specifically account for gesticulation: “He makes signes to her” (I.v). In other words, the text of Ignoramus seems to suggest at first that Surda’s newly-developed deafness should not be considered much of an impediment. However, though Torcoll seems confident of this fact at the outset of the action, the waggish servant Trico soon undercuts this assumption.

The first comedic prologue (delivered by a talking horse and its keeper) reveals from the very outset of the play that there will be no kindness afforded to Surda’s deafness:

_Horse_ The scene is said to be laid in Burdeaux where I my self have been heretofore, and that you are to act Surda the deaf Dwarf, the Maid of Torcol.

deceptions with the added confusion of Antonio’s twin brother having arrived in Bordeaux without his brother’s knowledge, the plot concludes with the revelation of Rosabella’s true identity and the marriage of Antonio and Rosabella/Isabelle.

14 The French word for “deaf” is “sourd,” as the playwright George Ruggle almost certainly knew; however, it is odd that Surda’s name mimics this French term when she has only been deaf for a number of months.
Using Surda’s deafness as a punch line becomes a precedent for her later treatment in the play. Because of Surda’s stringent watch, Antonio’s love of Rosabella at first seems prevented; however, Antonio’s servant Trico reveals that Surda’s impairment offers the perfect opportunity for manipulation so that his master Antonio can woo the beautiful Rosabella. The introductory argument for Act 1, scene 6 states that Trico “the crafty servant of Antonio, doth instruct him by what Arts he may deceive Surda, and have a Conference at the same time with Rosabella.” The opportunity is only available because of Surda’s profound deafness. Trico reveals that the two lovers can speak “what they [please],” but they must accompany their loving speech “in such angry and discontented Gestures that Surda observing it, should not suspect any thing of love betwixt them” (1.6). To compound distraction upon deception, Antonio’s companion Trico resolves to “pretend love to Surda” so that her attention will be torn away from Antonio, allowing him to properly woo Rosabella (1.6). Trico, “showing [Surda] a Ring,” intends to make her believe that “he courteth her in way of Marriage” (1.6). Because Surda will be distracted by Trico, she cannot be fully attentive of her mistress nor adequately read their lips to gather the subject of their conversation.

Trico’s specific instructions to Antonio state that while Trico engages Surda in his own false courtship, Antonio should, “In the mean time…hold conference with Rosabella, but let your gestures expresse much discontent and choler, that so she believing you to be at great variance, may permit you to talk more freely” (1.6). As the scene progresses, Trico’s plan is put to the test: Antonio and Rosabella gesticulate angrily upstage while Surda observes them. Surda tries to follow her orders to guard Rosabella and prevent Antonio from courting her, but she is distracted by Trico’s false wooing. Trico insults Surda’s appearance and stature, her intelligence, and her deafness in a series of mock-Petrarchan blazons, all while pretending to court her:
Trico  O lips of milk, nose of purple, eyes of a sheep, thigh of an Emmet, feet of a Calf,  
Hands of a Mole, Brest of a Grashopper, pap of all paps, oh neighing Mare, O  
grunling sow! Harrow the Flames that me consume!  

Surda  He is now praising my Beauty; I apprehend him, I am handsome enough, I thank my  
stars for it.  

Trico  Oh most diminute of all perfections, deaf and thick, and hopper-ars’d, old, and hairy,  
drunken, and apish. Oh my heart, my heart.  

Surda  He is struck into admiration with my Beauties; Oh that I were not deaf that I might  
hear my own prayses: I hope they will call me Dwarf no more. (1.6)

The original scene was most likely meant to incite uproarious laughter at not only Trico’s outlandish  
and descriptive insults, but also at Surda’s comical misunderstanding and ignorance. However, for  
the modern reader, the scene would be more likely to inspire pity for Surda’s predicament and  
resentment at Trico’s callousness. Surda’s misunderstanding suggests that though she can  
understand “by [the] nature” of facial expression and physical posturing – and can thus be  
manipulated by a skillful actor – her complete understanding of lip-reading appears to fall short of  
Torcoll’s suppositions.

Trico’s plan runs smoothly, for Surda’s dialogue reveals that she has been successfully duped  
by Antonio’s and Rosabella’s visibly-deceiving gestures. Interspersed throughout Surda and Trico’s  
conversation are Antonio’s directions to Rosabella, “Pretend to be passionately angry with me!”  
(1.6). Surda tries to depart from Trico, saying she “must be gone, yonder’s Antonio high in  
discourse, of whom my Master charged me to beware,” but she cannot quite disentangle herself  
from Trico’s web of lies. Surda begins to soften to Trico’s wooing, confident that Rosabella’s actions  
suggest her snubbing of Antonio’s advances: “well done Rosabella, you seem to be angry, and  
incensed against him” (1.6). Antonio’s and Rosabella’s actions continue to deceive Surda as she  
observes them and misinterprets the truth of the situation. When Antonio states, “I gave you my  
faith Rosabella, and striking thus your hand, I now again confirm it,” Surda declares, “How  
inhumanely he struck that young Lady! were I a man, I would fly in the very eyes of him” (1.6).
Later, when Rosabella gives Antonio letters, Surda mistakes them: “She hath rejected his Letters: That is well; His eyes are red with choler, he stamps on the ground, he is mad I think” (1.6). It is this conversation that leads to Antonio’s and Rosabella’s elopement, for the exchange of letters allows Antonio to trick Torcoll into handing Rosabella over to his disguised servant. Thus in Ruggle’s Ignoramus, disability becomes the perfect opportunity for manipulation. Antonio and Rosabella are able to plan their elopement and pursue forbidden love while standing directly in Surda’s line of sight simply because they are able to take advantage of Surda’s deafness, which allows them to speak honeyed words all while playacting angry gestures. Finally, this deception is only made possible because Trico is willing to take full advantage of Surda’s impairment, all the while mocking her for it.

Finally, in any discussion of the early modern trope of manipulating the impaired, the Elizabethan play The Historie of Jacob and Esau cannot go unmentioned; for rather than featuring a scene or act, the theme of manipulating the impaired functions as the linchpin for the entire plot. As previously described, Isaac’s helplessness in the play is near absolute, and he depends on his family and servants to assist him with every daily activity: “Isaac: Come, Mido, for without thee I can nothing do. / Mido: What is it, sir, that ye would have my help unto? / Isaac: Nothing but to sit abroad, and take th’ open air” (4.9). Isaac’s helpless undercuts his patriarchal authority in the play and becomes the perfect opportunity for Rebecca and Jacob to steal the blessing and favor bestowed upon the first-born son (which by all rights belong to Esau). Rebecca’s conversation with Jacob, her first introduction to the plot and the first chance readers have to establish her characterization, is constituted of a plan to trick Isaac into disinherit Esau of his birthright. In the second act, Rebecca makes it clear that she intends to use Isaac’s profound blindness to her advantage: “Our good old Isaac is blind, and cannot see, / So that by policy he may beguiled be”
In the end, it is made clear that the plan’s success depends upon Isaac’s blindness and the manipulation of it.

Rebecca and Jacob are not the sole perpetrators of this brand of dishonesty; in fact, the advantage that Isaac’s blindness affords is exploited by almost every other major and minor character in the play, including Esau, Mido, and several other servants. In one notable scene, Esau intends to eavesdrop on Isaac’s private conversations with Mido, so he stands quietly in the background so as not to reveal his own presence. Because Isaac is blind, he has no idea, and he has the false confidence that what he is saying has remained unheard:

*Esau:* Now, since I last saw mine old father Isaac,  
Both I do think it long, and he will judge me slack—  
But he cometh forth; I will here listen and see  
Whether he shall chance to speak any word of me. (*Steps aside.* (4.1))

Isaac’s conversations with Mido are by no means critical of Esau as Isaac simply voices his wish that Esau’s visits would be more frequent. However, despite the innocence of the matter, it nonetheless serves as obvious exploitation of the advantage that Isaac’s impairment allows.

Eavesdropping on Isaac, while he remains ignorant of the matter, occurs again when Rebecca listens to Isaac’s instructions to Esau and later states unabashed, “This talke of Isaac in secrete have I heard” before then coming up with the famous deception that follows (3.1):

*Jacob:* Mother, what have ye brought, and what things are those?  
*Rebecca:* Gear that I have prepared to serve our purpose;  
And because that Esau is so rough with hair,  
I have brought sleeves of kid next to thy skin to wear.  
They be made glovelike, and for each finger a stall:  
So that thy father’s feeling soon beguile they shall.  
Then have I brought a collar of rough kid’s hair,

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15 The prologue to the play suggests that the anonymous playwright espoused the Calvinist theology of predestination: “But now for our coming we shall exhibit here, / Of Jacob and Esau how the story was; / Whereby God’s adoption may plainly appear / And also that, whatever God’s ordinance was, / Nothing might defeat, but that it must come to pass” (*The History of Jacob and Esau*). Rebecca’s subsequent dialogue in Act 2 seems to excuse the manipulation of Isaac in Calvinist terms, by appealing to God’s will: “I shall devise how for no ill intent ne thought, / But to bring to pass that I know God will have wrought” (2.4).
Fast unto the skin round about they neck to wear.
Come, let me do it on, and if Isaac feel,
He shall therewith be beguiled wondrous well.

*Here she doth the sleeves upon Jacob’s arms.*

**Jacob:** And what shall this gear do that ye have brought?

**Rebecca:** It shall serve anon, I warrant you, take no thought.
Now, thoroughly to ravish thy father Isaac,
Thou shalt here incontinent put upon thy back
Esau his best apparel, whose fragrant flavor
Shall conjure Isaac to bear thee his favour. (4.9)

Rebecca’s machinations go according to her plan, for when the actual scene of their deceit occurs,

Isaac’s first question and attempt to discern the true identity of the son before him necessarily leans
upon his remaining senses. Isaac’s doubts are raised when he believes he hears the sound of Jacob’s
voice. Isaac then requests to touch his son to see if he can discover who stands before him: “Come
near, that I may feel, wether thou be he or not, / For Esau is rough of hair as any goat. / Let me feel
thy hand” (4.10). Upon feeling the goat hair that has been banded around Jacob’s arms, hands, and
neck, Isaac can do no more but to trust the senses that have yet to fail him. He declares, based on
his sensory observation of touch, that it must be “Esau, by the hair” (emphasis mine, 4.10), dismissing
the lingering incredulity he has concerning the sound of Jacob’s voice: “And yet the voice of Jacob
souneth in mine ear. / God bless thee, my son, and so will I do anon” (4.10). Jacob then leads Isaac
inside, while Mido jestingly remarks the ease with which Jacob and Rebecca have fooled Isaac:

**Mido:** I may now go play; Jacob leadeth Isaac.
But I never saw such a pretty knack,
How Jacob beguiled his father, how sleightly:
Now I see it true, the blind eat many a fly!
I quaked once for fear, that Jacob would be caught,
But, as hap was, he had his lesson well taught. (4.10)

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16 The reader should recall that the impulse to discover identity through the sense of touch is the same
reaction of Old Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*, when he asks to feel Launcelot’s face.
Mido, equally concerned about his own gain in the deceitful transaction, flippantly observes the benefit he may derive and dismisses its ethical turpitude: “I may now go play” (4.10).

The early modern trope of manipulating the blind is observed strongly in the plays Ignoramus and The Historie of Jacob and Esau, and the scenes are written in such a way to either stimulate a kind of affirmation through laughter or to stimulate the religious response of resignation. As in the previous chapter, the role of authority Jacob has as a relative member of the elite in The Historie of Jacob and Esau produces the same results that the purposeful donning of disability does. That is, Jacob’s trickery through disguise is applauded as skill and wit by Mido: “But I never saw such a pretty knack, / How Jacob beguiled his father, how sleightly…he had his lesson well taught” (4.10). Mido rationalizes that this example of deceiving the impaired only goes to show that the “blind eat many a fly” and raises the inevitable question of whether or not his contemporaneous audience would have automatically agreed with his observation (4.10). In the play, when Isaac inevitably learns that he has been heinously manipulated, he responds with an unbelievable contentedness, stating that the deception itself must have been God’s will:

\begin{quote}
For my master Jacob did bid me come to you.
Isaac: Nay, boy, it was not Jacob, I dare well say so.
Mido: Forsooth, it was Jacob, if my name be Mido.
Isaac: If that be a true tale, somebody is come slack,
But, Lord, that I have done I will not now call back.
But yet I will go see if I be deceived:
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Simone Chess lingers upon the double-meaning of Jacob’s “leading Isaac” (4.10), a double entendre that has also been emphasized by Sigurd Burckhardt while discussing the evident gullibility of Gloucester in King Lear: “Always a led man, [Gloucester] is now led in the literal sense; always in the dark, he is now enclosed with darkness and made to feel [sic] the mediacy of report” (Burckhardt 244). As Burckhardt and Robert B. Pierce have explored in their own studies, Gloucester had always been strung along by Edmund, but even Edgar (the good son) manipulates his blind father even if his reasoning seems more justified: “Edgar inverts reality for the old man as precipitously as did Edmund when portraying himself and his brother to their gullible father. Though their moral natures are opposite, both sons manipulate their father” (Pierce 161). As with Edmund’s duping of Gloucester, the literal and figurative misleading of Isaac in The Historie of Jacob and Esau proves all too easy.
For indeed methought Jacob’s voice I perceived. (4.11.)

Rather than responding, as any person might naturally do, with anger or disappointment, Isaac states calmly that “somebody is come slack” and that he had been suspicious all along that he had heard Jacob’s voice.

The staged mockery and manipulation of individuals’ impediments in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, which occur with absolutely no negative consequences, certainly raises the question of whether or not approving audience members would mimic such responses when interacting with legitimately impaired individuals. At this point of the argument it is vital to again reiterate that the plays examined are meant to depict interactions with other genuinely impaired characters. What readers discover in these dramatic works is that mockery and manipulation of the impaired is congratulated and applauded. If early modern drama with feigned disability helped to perpetuate the stereotypical fear that disabilities were blatantly fabricated or at the least exaggerated, early modern plays with demonstrations of genuine disability ironically serve as approbations to do unto others as you suspect they do unto you. Further, if the condition of disability had been used to deceive those of sound mind and body, as was demonstrated in the plots of plays such as *Beggars Bush* or *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, then the condition of disability could also be used to procure some benefit for those of sound mind and body. In other words, able-bodied individuals could take advantage of the genuinely impaired in order to manipulate them for their own amusement or gain; such is seen in the plots of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Ignoramus*, and *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*. Early modern plays with feigned sensory impairment – as previously discussed – greatly outnumber plays that depict characters with genuine disability. However, within that fraction of early modern plays showcasing a character that is blind or deaf, the majority of characters treat the impaired with an utter lack of
respect, kindness, or mercy. Rather than treating the impaired with compassion, they instead become laughingstocks who are then objects to be exploited for personal gain.

**Reinforcing the Early Modern Religious Model of Disabilities: Sixteenth-Century Poetry**

Along the same lines as the dramatic works we have examined, major poetic and prose works of the sixteenth century often portrayed authentic sensory disability in metaphorical or figurative terms. These poetic and prose works more often than not bolstered the impression of sensory impairment that society already held; in fact, works such as *The Faerie Queene* actually depend upon such early modern stigmatization in order to fully convey their themes (Hile 89). “Spenser ‘imports,’” says Hile, “the full weight of social stigmatization of bodily differences in early modern England into the text in order to convey moral meanings that have nothing to do with physical impairment,” and without the understood predominant cultural stance of disgust for physical and sensory impairment, Spenser would only have been able to convey a halting allegorical impression (89). Because of their similar roles as entertainment for fellow elite members of society, both Philip Sidney’s *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* and Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* serve as culturally significant examples of popular prose and poetry that conveyed and reiterated prevailing early modern attitudes toward sensory impairment. The portrayals of sensory debility within these works substantiate the common practice of reducing impairments to symbolize religious failing or interpreting impairments as manifestations of God’s divine judgment on the wicked. Finally, these two nondramatic works align with the prevailing early modern religious model of the sixteenth century, bolstering perceptions of disability in accordance with reformed theology.

Within Book II of Sidney’s pastoral romance *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, gifted to his sister, lies the story of the Paphlagonian king and his two sons, whom the primary characters of the *Arcadia* (Pyrocles and Musidorus) meet after taking shelter from a storm. Chapter ten of the second
book of Sidney’s *Arcadia* details “The pitifull state, and stories of the Paph[la]gonian unkinde King, and his kind sonne, first related by the son, then by the blind father” (Sidney 142). The tale itself will sound familiar to readers who have not before encountered it, for it has been understood as the source text for the Gloucester subplots in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Enclosed within the contents of Sidney’s tale, and later emulated and exaggerated beyond question in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, blindness becomes a metaphor for error or blind mistrust, which in a religious sense would be equivalent to *hamartia* – the Greek term for sin or error that translates literally as “to miss the mark” (*NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon*). Furthermore, in both tales, literal blindness becomes its own punishment for metaphorical blindness; in this way, this depiction of blindness further exemplifies the early modern tendency to perceive sensory impairment as both metaphor and penance.

Years before Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, the *Arcadia* was written and circulated: the original tale includes a history of the Paphlagonian king – a storyline that would later be separated into the narratives of Lear and Gloucester. The *Arcadia*’s text details how the King relinquishes his authority and power, leaving himself “nothing but the name of a King,” in much the same way that readers and audiences alike witness Lear bequeathing his power to Goneril and Regan (144). Within Leonatus’ and his father’s autobiographical description of their past, the king metaphorizes his own state of blindness as he conflates the literal fear of falling in his “blind steps” with the symbolic fall from power that was brought about by his own error: “fear not the danger of my blind steps, I cannot fall worse than I am” (171). The king then describes how he was “carried by” or misled “by a bastard son” to first “mislike, then to hate, lastly to destroy, or do my best to destroy this son

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18 Whereas *King Lear*’s primary plot has been usually posited as sourced dually from the anonymous play *King Leir* (entered into the Stationer’s Register in 1594) and from the revised 1587 edition of *Holinshed’s Chronicles*, the event of Gloucester’s blinding in *King Lear* creates its own conundrum, as it does not appear in the chronicle or play of King Leir.
The Paphlagonian king then attempts to have his heir Leonatus killed, but the servants ordered to murder Leonatus instead pity him and spare his life. The king details that the “unnatural” son, Plexirtus, after his gradual seizing of power becomes absolute, “put out my eyes” – a detail which suggests Plexirtus’ personal action rather than delegation. Meanwhile, the loyal son Leonatus escapes to a neighboring country and later becomes a successful private soldier. Similar to the subplot in *King Lear*, Leonatus returns to care for his father; however, he does not do so by way of a disguise of madness as Edgar does but instead bravely risks – “not reckoning danger” (173) – whatever peril his presence in Paphlagonia might entail.

It is after Leonatus has returned to guide and protect his father that Pyrocles and Musidorus overhear their lamentations. Leonatus and the Paphlagonian king are described respectively as a youth (“scarcely come to the age of a man”) and an older man: “both poorly arrayed, extremely weather-beaten; the old man blind, and the young man leading him” (171). The blindness and apparent poverty endured are described as antithetical to the “kind of nobleness” that the princes Pyrocles and Musidorus perceive in Leonatus and the king: “in both there seemed to appear a kind of nobleness, not suitable to that affliction” (171). Thus in this brief aside, as a matter of anticipated correspondence, poverty walks hand in hand with debility; likewise, the conditions of blindness and subsequent poverty are seen as afflictions that do not suit the “nobleness” of the men. The tale, told as a matter of recollection in the larger *Arcadia*, suggests that Pyrocles and Musidorus had guessed (before it was confirmed) that the weather-beaten men had met some misfortune and that the impairment and poverty that had been thrust on them were conditions expected to be seen only in lower classes (and certainly “not suitable” for nobles). The Paphlagonian king’s poverty is discovered to be absolute, for his cruel son Plexirtus disarms his own countrymen and forbids their showing any kindness to their rightful king – “no man durst show himself a well willer of mine”
The king states that any mercy or alms he receives is “scarce” and that yet “[it] was the only sustenance of my distressed life” (173). More so than material charity, the king indicates a yearning for guidance – “nobody dar[ed] to show so much charity as to lend me a hand to guide my dark steps” (emphasis mine, 173). Of course this desire for guidance is a literal necessity, given the Paphlagonian king’s newly experienced blindness; however, his desire can also be read as symbolic: the king has revealed a history of being misled, and lacking wisdom necessary to avoid deception, the king craves trustworthy guidance in his blindness. Even as Leonatus becomes that guide, his presence also continually recalls the king's error: “his kindness is a glass even to my blind eyes of my naughtiness” (173). Because of his general misery, despite reuniting with his son, the Paphlagonian king begs Leonatus to lead him to where he might throw himself from a cliff. Again, as Edgar later denies a similar suicide attempt from Gloucester, so Leonatus disobedies his father by refusing him this “pity” (173).

After the account has been told, the four noblemen become aware of the approach of the wicked son Plexirtus – who charges in with a cavalry of forty men with the “purpose to murder his brother, of whose coming he had soon advertisement” (174). A bloody clash ensues between opposing forces wherein Pyrocles, Musidorus, Leonatus, and an unexpected army led by the princes’ ally, the king of Pontus, begin to overpower Plexirtus’ army. Before Plexirtus comes to destruction, he is sequestered away by his own allies. Leonatus’ victory established, Leonatus is crowned the true king of Paphlagonia. Upon recognizing his son’s virtue and bequeathing the crown to his rightful heir, the blind king “even in a moment die[s]” because though “his heart [had been] broken with unkindness and affliction, [it now] stretched so far beyond his limits with this access of comfort that it was able no longer to keep safe his vital spirits” (146). Finally, recognizing his utter defeat, Plexirtus “thought better by humbleness to creep, where by pride he could not march…came to
offer himself to the discretion of Leonatus” (175-176). The tale ends with the brothers being fully reconciled with each other, rather than fighting a duel to the death, as in Shakespeare’s rendering. The depiction of the blind king of Paphlagonia within Sidney’s narrative is both literal and figurative; as previously discussed, his physical blindness is seen as a literal realization of his prior blind judgment as well as the consequence for his adultery. Similar to the depiction of Gloucester in King Lear, both the Paphlagonian king and Gloucester have sons out of wedlock that they favor more than their rightful heirs. Both men are blind to the true loyalty of their heirs and instead place foolish trust in the “ill-gotten” sons that ultimately betray them. For contemporary readers, certainly, the blinding of these men invokes sympathy for their misplaced trust, but for early modern audiences, their blindness becomes a literalized symbol of their moral failing. In this way, Sidney primarily utilizes blindness as a literary tool to underscore a moral lesson and reinforces the early modern tendency to view disability as a master metaphor for wrongdoing.

The theme that drives Book I of Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene is metaphorical blindness, for much of the chaos and struggles that both Una and the Redcrosse Knight (or St. George) face are the direct result of his inability to recognize the Truth. Furthermore, his ultimate lesson to become incarnate holiness is to not only recognize Truth but also to wed himself to Truth and defend it. Throughout The Faerie Queene, Spenser emphasizes the bond between the Redcrosse

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19 I situate the discussion of Spenser’s allegory in the terms of the early modern religious metaphorical perceptions of sensory disability, for as Rachel E. Hile iterates regarding the close relationship of metaphor and allegory, “the elaboration of metaphor into allegory certainly serves to enhance a reader’s awareness of metaphor as metaphor. One can breathe new life into a dead metaphor by extending it into an allegory, giving it characters and plot” (89).

20 Spenser’s The Faerie Queene has multiple layers of allegory, but for the purpose of this discussion, I focus on three: that is, the moral/spiritual allegory, the religious allegory, and the personal/historical allegory. I read
Knight (an exemplar of holiness, but also the representative of England and the protector of the Church of England) and Una (the symbol for the Protestant Church of England). In fact, the Redcrosse Knight’s failures notably occur when he has abandoned Una or has otherwise been separated from her, thus being symbolically blind and helpless without the guidance of Truth. For instance, after Redcrosse has valiantly defeated Error, he falls prey to another kind of error (the false visions of Archimago), and believing the false image projecting Una’s infidelity, he abandons her. Upon their separation, the Redcrosse Knight is able to defeat the Sarazin, Sansfoy (who serves as one of the foils for the knight for whereas Sansfoy is “without faith,” Redcrosse is the defender of it). However, he is immediately fooled by the dissimulation of Duessa, who falsely names herself Fidessa. It is clear throughout their alliance that the Redcrosse Knight’s desire for Duessa is an abomination that he himself is blind to.

Whereas the Redcrosse Knight’s “blindness” can certainly be interpreted as a result of his individual character failings and as a misattribution of Rome as the true Church, it can also be writ large. Insofar as the Redcrosse Knight can serve as a Protestant “everyman,” his metaphorical blindness to Duessa’s dissimulation might also serve as a representation of Protestant universal depravity. Thus, the Redcrosse Knight’s sinful errors – his “blindness” to the Truth – also represent the temptations that humanity faces in fallenness. In this way, Spenser’s representation aligns with the Elizabethan religious model of disability as I have outlined it: Although under the Protestant paradigm, disability could still be interpreted as resulting from sin, it was seen more broadly as a universal sin and not particularly an individual one. It is not until Una and King Arthur rescue him that Redcrosse begins to recognize his errors and seeks to rectify them. The religious symbolism of

Una as symbolically representing the moral quality of Truth, the religious allegory of the Protestant faith, and the historical allegory of the Church of England. Thus, my assertion that Book I details the Redcrosse Knight’s metaphorical blindness to the “truth” functions also as he fails to often differentiate Una from her magical doppelgangers and to resist the charms of Una’s foil, Duessa.
blindness in faith, discussed in the Introduction to this project, can be taken to its full extent in
*The Faerie Queene,* the Redcrosse Knight’s ignorance of true faith is the most critical impediment he
must overcome through his religious catechism in the House of Holiness before he can defeat the
dragon (Satan) and become the defender and husband to Una (the true faith). Though Book I’s
master metaphor of blindness and the ways in which spiritual blindness must be overcome goes
without saying, I have chosen to focus rather on the literal blindness that occurs in Canto iii of Book
I when Una takes refuge in the home of the blind Corceca and her deaf-mute daughter, Abessa.

In her informative article, “Disabling Allegories in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene,*” Rachel
E. Hile briefly examines the episode of Corceca and Abessa in order to illustrate her overarching
argument that Spenser presupposes disability stigmatization from his contemporary readers in order
to impart his moral allegory. As she argues, “Spenser takes for granted that his readers share
stigmatizing ideas about and rejecting emotional attitudes toward physical impairment; transferring
these ideas and attitudes allegorically from representations of impaired bodies to abstract ideas
serves as an efficient means of conveying meaning, because preexisting cultural biases perform some
of the work” (89). Within her analysis of Corceca and Abessa, Hile states that Spenser uses their
characterization as impaired individuals in order to allegorically “elicit an intellectual response, using
the image of physical or bodily privation to signal a moral incapacity essential to the plot of the
allegory” (89). As I have argued, the metaphorical treatment of blindness and deafness in early
modern religious dialogue was not unique to Spenser. However, while blindness in general was
understood to metaphorically represent a failure to recognize spiritual truth, in Corceca, blindness
more specifically represents the failure of a Catholic believer to recognize truth. In this way,
Spenser’s metaphorical treatment of Corceca precedes seventeenth-century clergymen such as John
Donne and John Owen who often utilized the conditions of blindness and deafness as master
metaphors for generalized religious error and ignorance; however, as previously stated, Spenser is specific where Donne and Owen prove more general in their application. Corceca, “literally, ‘blind heart,’” is blatantly portrayed as an adherent to the Catholic faith. Spenser depicts her religious practice to that of extreme superstition as she prays upon “beads…devoutly penitent; / Nine hundred Pater nesters every day, / And thrise nine hundred Aves” (I.xiii.114-117). She furthermore seems to practice severe penance several times a week for no specific reason but rather as a matter of ritualistic superstition: “Thrise every weewe in ashes she did sit, / And next her wrinkled skin rough sackcloth wore, / And thrise three times did fast from any bit” (I.xiv.119-121). By Hile’s count, Corceca is described literally as blind three times in the episode, but her blindness is also described in metaphorical terms. For instance, Corceca is said to sit “in eternall night,” a description that points hyperbolically to her physical condition as well as metaphorically situates Corceca’s chosen religious devotion as a marker of darkest ignorance (I.xii.103). This repetitive reference to her impairment reiterates the metaphorical usage that Spenser hopes to invoke through Corceca’s physical debility. However, as Hile aptly puts, Spenser’s assumption and duplication of the early modern stigmas toward sensory debilities only work “to increase the audience’s sense of the Otherness of, and hence the necessity of rejecting, those with bodily differences” (102).

Corceca’s blindness is joined by her daughter’s deaf-mute condition. Abessa’s name, “presumably derived from Latin abesse, ‘absence of being’; reminiscent of ‘abbess’ or ‘abbey,’” speaks dually of her absence of spiritual totality and association with the Catholic faith, and specifically with monasticism (Hile 95). Spenser’s nominalization for this character almost certainly refers to the monastic removal from the world, a subject that was often a specific target of Protestant invective. The Protestant criticism of monasteries was not uncommon even among Catholics prior to the Reformation, and this extant disapproval seemed to have contributed to the
eventual dissolution and plundering of monasteries. For instance, in Sir Francis Bigod’s *Treatise on Impropriations of Benefices* (ca. 1535), Bigod typifies himself as follows: “No lover of monks, he hated their idleness and sloth and looked to the confiscation of their impropriated benefices to support...preaching priests” (Hoyle 281). The observations made by Bigod, who was himself a Catholic, still censure monks with descriptions that would align with the later Protestant work ethic; monks by all accounts apparently thrived without working for their own bread and butter. Such idleness would not do within the Protestant paradigm, as is demonstrated by the rigid insistence in the English Poor Laws that donatives only be stipulated for the “deserving poor” and not the “sturdy poor.” Monasteries and their inhabitants were a subject of satire and criticism for other theologians, such as Desiderius Erasmus, “who satirized monasteries as lax, as comfortably worldly, as wasteful of scarce resources, and as superstitious” (Bernard 393). Bigod and most other Catholics did not go so far as to suggest the dissolution of monasteries; all the same, they expressed criticism of the “improper impropriations with other superfluities” that were afforded through the charitable donations of others (Bigod qtd. in Hoyle 281). As Hoyle states, “Even Henry VIII could lean to the view that it would serve God’s purpose to deprive the clergy of their temporal wealth” (281). The believed “temporal wealth” within monasteries perhaps acting as a stimulus for the eventual dissolution and seizing of property and goods, which occurred with Henry VIII’s 1536 statute. Following this dissolution and the events of the Reformation, the general Protestant opinion toward monasticism naturally became more vitriolic with increased “anticlerical agitation” (Hoyle 284) that perpetuated and amplified the critiques of Erasmus. The Protestant animosity toward monasticism

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21 Though financial benefit is often attributed as the primary cause for Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries (by such scholars as Lucy Beckett, Howard Colvin, Joyce Youings, or John Guy), G. W. Bernard argues instead that “more important factors were Henry VIII’s determination to assert his royal authority and...especially [because of] an erasmian scepticism [sic] about the value of institutions that set their face against the world and in which superstition flourished” (390).
clarifies the perspective of negative bias that early modern readers would have automatically correlated with Abessa, even without her physical impairment – the existence of which arguably would have heightened distrust and bolstered the religious association between religious error and physical impairment.

Despite the association of Abessa with Catholicism through her own name and through her mother’s feverish exercise of Catholic rituals (both of which suggest a preponderance of religious activity and belief), Abessa proves to be a character that Spenser characterizes as incapable of any faith. As Jennifer L. Nelson and Bradley S. Berens put astutely, Abessa

is completely outside the culture and outside the sphere of divine salvation. She cannot hear the true will of God and allegorically represents the Catholic Church in opposition to Una, who represents the true Anglican church. Abessa cannot perceive spiritual truth, and her impairments place her outside the realm of redemption…What Abessa shows us is that only hearing people – those who already belong to the mainstream, “normal” world – can enjoy the privileges pertaining to deafness. (61).

Whereas Corceca’s literal blindness does not hinder her from religious practice or belief – though it hinders the recognition of true religion and thus becomes a religiously symbolic blindness, according to Spenser – Abessa’s deaf-mutism renders her inept in “learn[ing] and understand[ing] the truth” according to Spenser and his contemporary audience (95). In this way, the blind Corceca seems to hold some advantage over the deaf-mute Abessa; a reality which correlates with the early modern tendency to place more religious value in speech and hearing than in sight.

The preference for the condition of blindness over deafness was not a new consideration, for Aristotle pronounced in his own estimation that “of persons destitute from birth of either sense [blindness or deafness], the blind are more intelligent than the deaf and dumb” (“On Sense and Sensibilia” 437a4-437a16). This stigmatization is further expressed in George Hakewill’s The Vanitie
of the Eye.\textsuperscript{22} In this work, Hakewill elevates the condition of blindness as spiritually and intellectually favorable over the condition of deafness:

\begin{quote}

we have heard of many blinde men who have become famous for wisdom & learning; but of deafe men we have not heard of any: for which cause (as I suppose) in our common law such as are borne deafe, though they see perfectly well, yet are they ranked among mad men, lunaticke persons, and children, whome (as Bracton affirmeth) in cases of felony, their very want of common reason and understanding priviledgeth from the ordinary punishment inflicted by lawe. (102-103)
\end{quote}

Although The Vanitie of the Eye will be examined in more detail later in this chapter, it is worth noting at this juncture that Hakewill’s uncommon tolerance for and even elevation of the impediment of blindness does not extend to that other sensory impediment: deafness. Hakewill’s ill opinion of deaf individuals – which can be broadened in terms of early modern opinion – as incapable of “wisdom & learning” and in fact “ranked among mad men” is later expressed in religious terms. Hakewill describes the prevailing early modern position regarding the religious ceremonies and salvation of the deaf: “men borne deaf are excluded from [the] sacrament by the common consent of divines but not blind [men]” (Hakewill 120). In this statement, Hakewill cites the less charitable opinions of divines who believed that the deaf should be denied the sacraments, to the point of “‘[deceiving them] in a friendly manner’ by giving them unconsecrated altar bread” (qtd. in Teaching Language to a Boy Born Deaf 10). Beyond denying participation in the sacraments, Hakewill suggests that deafness hinders the possibility of salvation: “First then for faith which S. Paule defines to be the evidence of things not sene, & by which we walk, not by sight, wee find it to bee bred by hearing onely as the ordinarie meanes, and nourished by the same alone, as by the ordinance of God” (Hakewill 120-121).\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} The publication date of the first edition of this work is unknown; however, the second and third editions were published respectively in 1608 and 1615.

\textsuperscript{23} As referenced by David Cram and Jaap Maat, there were isolated exceptions to the rule under the Catholic Church that deaf-mutes could not partake of the sacraments of marriage and communion: Pope Innocent III in 1198 “ruled that a deaf-mute…may contract marriage, since what a person cannot make known by words they can declare by signs,” and “A widely used late-fifteenth-century manual for Catholic Church practice by
other words, Hakewill argues that whereas the blind may still partake of Christian salvation, finding similar salvation is an impossibility for the deaf that the “ordinance of God” verifies.

Hakewill’s statements confirm Hile’s earlier declaration – that “Abessa’s impairments are understood by Spenser and his contemporary audience as making it impossible for her to learn and understand the truth” (95) – and reiterate early modern reformed liturgy. In Hile’s article, Una’s and Abessa’s first meeting – in which Una discovers “A damzell…slow footing her before, / That on her shoulders sad a pot of water bore” (I.x.89-90) – is equated with Christ’s meeting the Samaritan woman at the well (95). However, whereas the Samaritan woman in the book of John proves receptive to the truth that Christ offers, “the rude wench” in The Faerie Queene “answerd [Una] nought at all; / She could not heare, nor speake, nor understand” (I.xi.93-94). Putting Abessa’s general lack of comprehension and inability to communicate in such painstaking terms (in a trifold sequence) – lacking the ability to “heare, nor speake, nor understand” – bears a magnitude of religious significance because it emphasizes the absolute impossibility for Abessa to partake in early modern practices of religion. Early modern society supposed a spiritual ineptitude in the deaf that was bolstered by reformed liturgy. Just as the book of Romans details the steps to Christian salvation – “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” and “if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (KJV, Romans 10:17 and 10:9) – so early modern catechism and practice called for the hearing and repetition of words of faith. As touched upon in the Introduction, the liturgy for “Private Baptism” in the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer required the minister to emphasize the importance of both hearing and speech in the furthering of religious understanding and zeal:

de Clavasio stated that ‘a mute may request sacraments by signs and they should be given to him’” (Teaching Language to a Boy Born Deaf 9-10).
that [the child being baptized] may know these thiges the better, ye shal call vpon him to hear sermōs. And chiefly ye shal prouide that he may learned the Crede, the Lordes praier and the x Commaundemētēs in the English tongue, and al other thinges which a Christian mā know, and beleue to his soules health, and that this child may be virtuously brought vp, to leade a godly, and a christian lyfe. (115)

If the means to salvation depends upon the ability of an individual to “hear sermōs” and to pronounce various creeds and scriptures in “the English tongue” – or any tongue – then the consequence of deafness or muteness necessarily creates an impediment to salvation according to this authoritative religious text. By rendering Abessa a deaf-mute, Spenser created a character in early modern society that would be considered more insensible to the Truth than her physically blind and obsessively Catholic mother. Lacking a foundation of language, Abessa remains untaught and unreached. Thus, Abessa’s responses to Una in her forced ignorance are, first and foremost, absolute fear and later absolute wrath.

In addition to Spenser utilizing the reality of Abessa’s deaf-mutism as a symbolic obstruction to Truth or faith, Spenser also uses Abessa’s sexual relationship with Kirkrapine to underscore her religious immorality. Kirkrapine – “plunderer of churches” (Hile 95) – is described as Abessa’s lover and a man who often gives plundered goods from churches to the two women for their provision:

And all that he by right or wrong could find,
Unto this house he brought, and did bestow
Upon the daughter of this woman blind,
Abessa, daughter of Corceca slow,
With whom he whoredome usd, that few did know,
And fed her fat with feast of offerings,
And plenty, which in all the land did grow;
Ne spared he to give her gold and rings. (I.xviii.154-161)

24 Given the Protestant plundering of Catholic monasteries and Abessa’s symbolic association with Catholic monasteries, her sexual relationship with Kirkrapine is full of irony as well as seeming contradiction.
Abessa’s and Corceca’s roles as abettors and beneficiaries of Kirkrapine’s plundering of the church becomes another cause for disgust from the contemporary reader of *The Faerie Queene*. Abessa’s and Corceca’s anguish at seeing Kirkrapine slain by the lion after attempting to break in upon Una quickly turns to a “Halfe mad[ness] through malice, and revenging will” (I.xxii.197). Here, Spenser’s text seems to support the argument for an insurmountable communication barrier between the two women and Una, for just as Una’s words in previous stanzas only signify threat to the two women (who cower in corners while Una pleads for a place to sleep), so Corceca’s and Abessa’s later railings become so much “bray[ing],” “hollow [insubstantial] howling” to Una’s ears: “Whom overtaking, they gan *loudly bray*, / With *hollow howling*, and lamenting cry, / Shamefully at her rayling all the way” (I.xxiii.199-201). Whereas Christ was able to meet and transform the life of the Samaritan woman – because she was able to hear, understand, and respond – the meeting between Una, Corceca, and Abessa is utterly fruitless. Corceca is blinded by her mechanical superstition, and Abessa is incapable of hearing or understanding the Truth even when it stands directly before her eyes. The examples of Sidney’s and Spenser’s works only confirm the predominant and uniform attitudes that sixteenth-century English society held as a direct result of the reforming doctrine of the Protestant church. Taking sixteenth-century literature as a depiction of Elizabethan ideology of the sensorily-impaired, we can see that sensory debility was most often couched in the primarily deprecatory terms of metaphor and punishment.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I began by examining two interrelated themes, both concerning early modern dramatic representations of the authentically disabled. The first theme of forcible blinding was primarily explored through Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, wherein Gloucester’s blinding is accompanied simultaneously with a revocation of his social and political status. The literal removal of Gloucester’s
eyes accompanies the removal of his physical capability and social authority as he is thrown out of doors and forced to depend on a seeming beggar and madman. Writ large, readers can understand a figurative parallel construction as Gloucester – illuminated with the truth even in his blindness – nonetheless becomes a wandering, impaired beggar forced to rely on the goodness of strangers.

The second theme in the chapter analyzes the lived experience of naturally occurring sensory disability, which in the plays observed, most often resulted in the mockery and manipulation of the impaired. Examining these portrayals of genuine sensory disability reinforced previously established arguments concerning early modern societal distrust of impairment. As Zina Weygand similarly remarked in her study of blindness and historical societal perceptions of it, “Whether they provoked laughter or horror, the blind at the beginning of the modern era were on the side of misdeed…and despite [the] open-mindedness of certain humanist authors, blindness was still the object of feelings too ambiguous to produce a real revolution in the social treatment of those afflicted with it” (35).

The various responses of characters to their authentically impaired cohorts perpetuated detrimental perceptions and modeled potential harmful interactions by the plays’ contemporaneity. The early modern trend of depicting false impairment bolstered the popular position that seemingly disabled beggars were fabricating their impediments; likewise, Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic representations of genuine disability seemed to approve peer responses of scornful flippancy and callous exploitation.

In addition to its discussion of primarily sixteenth-century dramatic works with staged depictions of authentically-impaired characters, I also briefly discussed poetic works in multiple early modern popular poetic and prose works that were published and disseminated broadly in the late sixteenth-century. These poetic works primarily reiterated the already prevailing societal ideologies toward sensory disability that were expressed in performed dramatic works. Both Spenser’s The
Faerie Queene and Sidney’s Arcadia – two popular sixteenth-century works – portray sensory disability in detrimental metaphorical terms or simply as a poetic symbolic convention. Both Sidney’s and Spenser’s texts function as examples that confirm the predominant attitudes that Elizabethan English society held as a direct result of the reformed doctrine of the Protestant church.

The first two chapters of this project have primarily expressed the negative outcomes of the Reformation upon perceptions of sensory disability during the sixteenth century and into the early seventeenth century. Despite the overtly negative ramifications of early modern onstage and offstage representations of sensory disability, glimpses of a more optimistic outlook are demonstrated not only toward the disabled but also toward disability itself. This thread points to the future exploration of unorthodox interpretations of the disabled, which ultimately culminated in a shift in cultural ideology in the midst of the seventeenth century. Some plays, like The Historie of Jacob and Esau, devote special attention to exploring what it means to be impaired. Simone Chess argues this same line of thought in her article “Performing Blindness” as she relates that Isaac’s wife, Rebecca, and his servant, Mido, both express the practicalities of leading Isaac and caring for him in his blindness. Chess also notes the important relationship between Isaac being physically blind and his being symbolically blind to the truth of Jacob’s deception; in much the same way, she specifically lingers on the significance of Isaac being physically led and his being led, or strung along by Rebecca’s and Jacob’s dishonesty (114).

Beyond this initial analysis, delving further into the nuances of the play reveals that The Historie of Jacob and Esau seems particularly concerned with exploring the nature of sensory impairment, for several unimpaired characters experience the same characteristic impediments as Isaac does due to his own legitimate blindness. In various moments of the play, able-bodied characters express confidence in their own abilities to hear or see, only to have that confidence or
ability undercut. These repeated instances in the play strongly suggest the playwright’s experimental description of impairment as well as the expression of anxiety regarding the unreliability of bodily senses. For instance, in the first act of the play, Isaac asks Mido (the servant boy who is Isaac’s guide and help) to locate Rebecca, his wife. At the moment Isaac asks him to accomplish this, Rebecca is speaking to Jacob, and Mido must try to decipher what Rebecca is doing and what she might be saying while he himself is out of earshot. This moment provides an interesting case study in the lived experience of sensory depravity because (as a deaf person would necessarily be forced to do), Mido must interpret based solely on visible cues, and then relay those visual clues to a man who himself cannot see:

*Isaac:* Come, lead me forth of doors a little, I thee pray.
*Mido:* Lay your hand on my shoulder, and come on this way.

...Sir, whither would ye go, now that abroad ye be?

*Isaac:* To wife Rebecca.
*Mido:* Yonder I do her see…

Yonder she is speaking, whatever she doth say:

By holding up her hands, it seemeth she doth pray. (1.4)

This brief interlude situates the two characters in the potentially comical situation of the deaf leading the blind, which aligns with the clown-like characteristics Mido displays throughout the drama. She “seemeth...[to] pray,” says Mido, as he interprets Rebecca’s gesticulations as best he can while experiencing his own kind of hearing impairment, brought about by physical distance.

Beyond this scene, where the characters seem to consider what it must feel like to be sensorily impaired, the dialogue becomes more explicit in the exploration. For instance, Mido and Esau at various times are duped on account of purposed concealment by other characters. In Act 3, scene 1, Esau purposefully hides himself from Mido (he doesn’t need to hide himself from Isaac, who could not see him regardless), and Mido expresses stunned surprise when Esau abruptly reveals himself after Isaac says he wishes he knew where Esau was:
Mido: Forsooth, Master Isaac, and I knew it where,  
   It should not be very long ere I would be there.  
   But shall I at adventure go seek where he is?  

Esau: Seek no farther, Mido: already here he is.  

...  

Mido: Here he is come now invisible, by my soul:  
   For I saw him not, till he spake hard at my poll! (3.1)

Mido’s shock at the limits of his own sight place him in an uncomfortable position, and he must rationalize his limitations by claiming some sort of invisibility. Later, Esau’s use of concealment is turned on him as his servants hide from his wrath (after he loses his father’s blessing in addition to the birthright he unwisely sold to Jacob), as the editorial stage directions describe: “Ragan [one of Esau’s servants] and the others must be supposed to be at the back of the stage, out of Esau’s sight; but they come forward severally, and plead for themselves” (5.6). After he repeatedly calls each servant, they “come forward” to deny their own parts in the deception that Rebecca and Jacob organize. Furthermore, Esau experiences a similar shock and rage while, plotting his revenge on Jacob, he is surprised by his mother’s unannounced entrance while his back is turned:

Esau: And is Jacob gone to the house of Bethuel?  
   The whirlwind with him, and flinging fiend of hell!  
   But I shall meet with him yet one day well enough.  
   And who is this? my mother? whom I see here now.  

Ragan: She stood here all this while sir, did ye not her see?  

Esau: Didst thou see her stand here, and wouldest not warn me? (5.10)

Again, similarly to Mido, Esau is abruptly confronted with the limitations of his own sight, and his surprise quickly gives way to rage as he blames his servant Ragan for the oversight (or, more accurately, lack of sight). Thus, throughout the play, various characters practice concealment to either trick others or to avoid punishment; however, the response it incites from the deceived characters is one of shock as they must face the limitations of their own senses.

Examples such as those briefly explored above suggest the possibility of a humanizing turn buried within these texts, and other kernels of hope exist within some of the aforementioned plays.
For instance, regardless of Edgar’s familial relationship to Gloucester, Edgar still sympathizes with Gloucester and offers him assistance. Although admittedly hypocritical as she herself takes advantage of Isaac, Rebecca still censures Mido’s mocking performance of Isaac’s blindness, condemning the callousness of Mido’s actions. And despite the presence of mockery and manipulation of Isaac’s blindness in *The Historie of Jacob and Esau* and Gloucester’s blindness in *King Lear*, both plays nonetheless indicate that even the able-bodied can be deceived, even the seeing can be blind. With these revelations in mind, I begin Chapter Four, which concerns works that exemplify the doctrinal negotiations within Protestantism, allowing for increasingly heterodox – and humanistic – interpretations of disability.
CHAPTER FOUR

SEEING WITHOUT SENSE: UNCONVENTIONAL DEPICTIONS OF DISABILITY

IN EARLY MODERN POETRY AND PROSE

“When the eie of the outward sense, growes dull, & dim, the intellectuall eie of reason, and the spirituall eie of faith, grow more fresh, and cleare…And if there were noe other commodity in blindnesse, yet for this alone, were it even to be wished for”

- George Hakewill

Introduction

The introductory chapter to this dissertation outlined the manner in which the sixteenth-century reformed perspectives on disability both deviated from the medieval religious model of disability as well as mirrored it in its uniformity. The four medieval explanations for the impaired body which depended upon a Catholic ideology – the debilitated body as a manifested punishment for sin brought about by the wrath of God, a metaphorical figure for sin, a stimulant for charity, and the possible site for miraculous cure – could not universally be maintained under Protestant ideology. The problematic interpretations of impairment as both metaphor and punishment persisted under reformed doctrine. However, the benefits derived from understanding an impaired body as a stimulus for charity or as a site for miraculous cure were largely excised under the tenets of the Church of England, and the dramatic works discussed in chapters two and three detailed the ways in which the depiction of disabilities primarily onstage and also in popular non-dramatic poetic works functioned as a means of rejecting medieval religious responses to debility. The system of charitable exchange existing within the reign of the Catholic Church promised dual compensation

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for the almsgiver and disabled beneficiary, for the beggar would receive the alms they pled for while the almsgiver would anticipate a spiritual reward for their good work in the form of heavenly justification or blessings and prayers from the beggar. However, the Catholic belief in justification through the dual virtues of faith and works – “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only” (James 2:24) – which contributed to an active participation in charitable giving ultimately became obsolete under the nullifying reformed pronouncement of sola fide: faith alone and not works.¹ The removal of the religious charitable imperative likewise seemed to remove the burden of individual responsibility for the caretaking of the disabled poor; simultaneously, a succession of issued English Poor Laws continued to take on the burden of caring for the poor that had previously been in the hands of Catholic institutions and practitioners. As the second chapter on sixteenth-century dramatic and non-dramatic depictions of false impairment exemplified, societal skepticism toward genuine debility was bolstered through staged productions and popular publications that reified disability stigmas. Sixteenth-century literature portrayed early modern societal skepticism toward the disabled poor and the rejection of a charitable ideal for treatment of the disabled poor. Depictions of false disability onstage worked to reinforce those beliefs by adding credence to the assumption that most disabled individuals were only “seeming so.” The majority of sensory disabilities portrayed on the early modern stage were in fact feigned or exaggerated, a reality which only worked to verify the false belief that the impoverished impaired were not actually impaired, but were most likely taking advantage of any well-meaning citizen who gave them alms.

¹ As previously discussed, charity was not actively discouraged by the Protestant church – throughout the New Testament, Christians are urged to be generous with those in need (see Acts 20:32-35, 2 Corinthians 6-8, or 1 Timothy 6:17-19 for example). However, the urgency to complete good works for the sake of justification through works was discouraged. Instead, under reformed doctrine, good works were a sign of a saved soul rather than a means to save a soul.
Likewise, whereas the medieval impaired body was viewed as a potential site for miraculous healing where one could testify to God’s omnipresence in daily life, the early modern disabled body under reformed theology became a site of suspicion connected with Catholic subterfuge. Protestant theology largely removed tangible signs of miracle in daily life and did not allow for such an interpretation of the disabled body; instead, miracles were often associated with the sinful “magic” of the Catholic Church, and claims of miraculous cure were greeted with skepticism. Staged productions such as Shakespeare’s 2 Henry VI substantiated this skepticism: in this play, the beggar Simpcox is revealed as staging his own miraculous recovery from the blindness he claimed plagued him from birth. In fact, as the scene unfolds, Simpcox is discovered to have never been blind at all. The extreme Protestant skepticism directed toward avowed miracles was symptomatic of the violent rejection of any semblance of a prior Catholic faith. Some theologians, such as Bishop John Hooper who was listed among the most prominent Protestant martyrs under Queen Mary in Foxe’s Actes and Monuments, went so far as to claim that there was no longer a need for miracles in the early modern period (Hooper qtd. in Levack 41). Thus, with the removal of miracle and charity, the majority perceptions of sensory debility in the framework of sixteenth-century English society were primarily pejorative – either impairments were reduced to metaphors for religious failing or were interpreted as signs of God’s divine judgment on the wicked. Even as it rejected Catholic modes of perception, the late sixteenth-century religious model of disabilities nevertheless resembled the medieval by largely expressing a nonnegotiable interpretation of disabilities as tools for religious metaphor, manifestations of sin, or realizations of divine wrath.

What, then, are we to make of the body of literary works which describe sensory impairments as neither metaphors nor embodiments of God’s wrath, but rather describe them as religious assets to the Reformed believer? This is in fact the case for several poetic and prose works
of the seventeenth century that offer a perspective contra the more uniform religious
interpretation of disabilities during the Elizabethan Settlement. The answer to this seeming
conundrum lies in the fluctuating nature of reformed theology. Protestantism under the Elizabethan
Settlement was by no means settled; however, dissention was largely contained. Church liturgy under
Elizabeth chose the middle ground between polarized religious beliefs and would not allow for a
multiplicity of religious interpretation. This repression of nonconformity became even more strained
under James I, but still the Church of England upheld the principles maintained in the 1559 Book of
Common Prayer. However, this control was destined to crumble under Charles I, when Archbishop
Laud provoked Puritan radicals with his more conservative, High Church Laudianism. The 1559
Book of Common Prayer, which had largely placated a passive but arguably disgruntled minority in its
understood turn back toward Protestantism even as it presented a more latitudinarian doctrine, was
abandoned after the execution of Charles I.² Shortly after the Restoration of Charles II, in 1662, a
revised version of the work appeared. In contrast to the controlled dissent under the Elizabethan
Church of England, the reigns of James I and Charles I (1603–1649) were characterized by Sectarian
Proliferation reacting against the Elizabethan Settlement. Puritan dissenters, who hoped to remove
any indication of their Catholic ancestry from their religious practice, increased in number and
variety as various sects began to form in order to provide for themselves in doctrine what the
Church of England had apparently failed to do. The diversity of religious belief that became part and
parcel of the seventeenth century transformed the sixteenth-century iteration of the religious model
of disability into a model characterized by religious multiplicity of interpretation. Without this

² Religious disagreements continued during the reign of Elizabeth: from Marian exiles who believed that the
tenets upheld by the Church of England were not nearly radical enough to conservatives and secretly-
practicing Catholics still resistant to religious change. However, the major works published and Acts and
Articles passed under Elizabeth’s reign indicate a dismissal of these disagreements – in what A. G. Dickens
represents an attempt by the ecclesiastical authority to religiously bully a resisting public – as a means of
establishing a unified reformed faith tradition.
religious multiplicity, the early modern religious model of disabilities might have remained static; however, the diversification of religious interpretation created a radically dynamic early modern religious model of disabilities that is observable in the contrasting and often contradictory depictions of the disabled in early modern literature. This chapter highlights exceptions to the rule found within seventeenth-century contemplative confessional and devotional poetry, closet dramas, and finally private and epistolary prose works. While the prior chapters have emphasized the first negotiations of an early modern religious model, influenced by the Elizabethan pressure for uniformity of religious belief, this chapter highlights the ways in which religious sectarianism began to dynamically transform societal perceptions of disability as evidenced in seventeenth-century literature.

Defending Debility: an Argument for Impairment

With the progression of the seventeenth century and the influx of varying religious interpretations of scripture that impacted every aspect of life and society, heterodox discussions of disability began to surface in literature. These heterodox depictions of disabilities humanize the experience of living with impairments and offer a counterargument to the previously dogmatic sixteenth-century religious model of disabilities. Among them are George Hakewill’s *The Vanitie of the Eye*, several of John Milton’s poetic works and his closet drama *Samson Agonistes*, Thomas Traherne’s metaphysical and devotional poetry, and Jonathan Swift’s autobiographical poem “The Dean’s Complaint.” All demonstrate a changing ideological framework that allowed for altered interpretations of sensory impairment. Whereas the examples of sensory impairment in the previous two chapters were written from the perspectives of able-bodied playwrights, poets, and writers, these works are derived from a unique subsection of early modern society because most of these

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3 The authors of these works demonstrate a unique subset of society; they were either known for sympathetic and uncharacteristically charitable attitudes toward the impoverished and impaired, were personally associated with individuals suffering from sensory disability, or ultimately experienced sensory disability themselves.
writers were either familiarly associated with individuals suffering from sensory disability or personally experienced sensory disability themselves. Thus, while prior chapters examine popular literature and performance that treats impairment as a spectacle reiterating the established reformed position, the poetry and prose to come offer interpretations that encourage the humanizing of impairment as well as the countercultural contemplation of debility as a potential spiritual benefit.  

The Spiritual Benefits of Deafness

According to the biographical work of Angela Russell, “The Life of Thomas Traherne,” there are only two “seventeenth-century references to Traherne [that] give any biographical facts” (Russell 34). In Anthony Wood’s *Athenae Oxomenses*, Traherne “was entered a commoner” at the age of fifteen when he enrolled in “Brasen-n. College,” being “a shoemaker’s son of Hereford” (qtd. Russell 35). In the same source, Traherne’s father is subsequently described as “the poor shoemaker” (qtd. in Russell 36). The second resource is part of the preface to *Serious and Pathetical Contemplation*, “published under the auspices of the non-juring priest, Dr. George Hickes,” and speaks to Traherne’s position as a minister of the Church of England (Russell 34). To argue Traherne as a man who was uniquely charitable and cognizant of the suffering of the disabled and poor, one only has to refer to this aforementioned preface, wherein is written that Traherne was a man “ready to do all good Offices to his Friends, and Charitable to the Poor almost beyond his ability” (Hickes qtd. in Russell 35). Although Traherne was known in his lifetime for having a benevolent and sympathetic disposition, his mystic contemplations were in all probability unknown

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4 Rather than examining these works chronologically, I will incorporate different works into these topical categories: first, I will address the metaphysical poet Thomas Traherne, who is historically known for a sympathetic and uncharacteristically charitable attitude toward the impoverished and impaired (though limited biographical information makes a concrete association between the poet and the early modern impaired impossible to substantiate). Second, I will analyze the work of George Hakewill, who was personally associated with individuals suffering from sensory disability. Finally, I will turn to the works of John Milton and Jonathan Swift, who personally experienced a sensory disability.
while he was alive. In fact, only one of his works was published in his lifetime, *Roman Forgeries*, and that roughly a year before his death in 1674. Still, only two more of his theological prose works were published in the seventeenth century, and it was not until the early twentieth century that Traherne’s most famous works – *Poetical Works, Centuries of Meditations*, and *Poems of Felicity* were published in 1903, 1908, and 1910, respectively. Because of this publication history, Traherne cannot be said to have influenced his seventeenth-century contemporaries through his writing. However, his poems and contemplations reveal a man “deeply and explicitly engaged with contemporary events” as well as an individual who was regularly meditating upon heterodox interpretations of the value of sensory impairment (Dodd and Gorman xvi). Indeed, many of Traherne’s poems reveal an unconventional and radical elevation of sensory impairment.

In both “Dumnesse” and “Silence,” readers see a poet deeply engaged with contemplating the beneficial spiritual side effects of muteness and deafness. In their exploration of Traherne’s desire for voluntary deafness, Jennifer L. Nelson and Bradley S. Berens also reference a similar sentiment expressed in a sermon by John Donne, where he discusses the sense of hearing as a particular vulnerability to sin. While Donne discusses how the able-bodied might seek to avoid sin in a reality tainted by sin, Traherne seems instead to dwell wistfully on the prenatal and infant attributes of deafness and muteness in terms of language and how these naturally-occurring linguistic impediments cause individuals to avoid the injuries of sin:

…For sin and death
Are most infused by accursed breath,
That flowing from corrupted entrails, bear
Those hidden plagues which souls may justly fear. (12-16)

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5 *Christian Ethicks* was published a year following Traherne’s death, in 1675, and *A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation of the Mercies of God* was published at the turn of the century, in 1699 (Dodd and Gorman 199).
Traherne explicitly expresses a nostalgic desire for deafness and muteness that, for a man able to speak and hear without impediment, seem like a luxurious cessation of sin-laced speech.\(^6\) As Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood aptly argue in “Early Modern Literature and Disability Studies,”

“Dumnesse,” in fact, evidences not just a celebration of disability but a real longing for it; the inability to communicate orally is a “Blessed Case”...that we all should hope for...In Traherne’s aesthetic, impairment is something to be held close, kept integral, and invited to thrive...In “Dumnesse,” impaired speech is an epistemological benefit not a deficit. It is the fundamental condition of possibility for the narrator’s spiritual life and a distinct inability he wishes he might never have lost; further, it is the root of the poet’s aesthetic. (40)

At the root of Traherne’s praise for muteness and deafness is his overarching concept of the innocence provided through absolute privative interiority: a “perfect innocency by creation,” as Thomas Wilson’s contemporary definition of “innocence” describes (qtd by Dodd 216).\(^7\) In “Dumnesse,” Traherne praises “Wise Nature” for having made man “deaf...that He might / Not be disturbed, while he doth take delight / In inward things” (9-11). The “deaf[ness]” that Traherne speaks of is an infantile obliviousness to human language that makes infants impervious to the “errors and wrongs / That mortal words convey” (12-13).

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\(^6\) Nelson and Berens make it a point to emphasize the importance of Traherne’s desire for “elective deafness,” because, as they discuss, the impediment of deafness would only seem a welcome relief for those who are already able to experience the sensation of hearing (61). The desire for silence (deafness) or muteness is a desire that can only be felt by the abled-bodied and cannot be shared by those experiencing involuntary deafness or muteness.

\(^7\) As a kind of survey as well as explanation of Traherne’s concept of innocence and the foundations for his beliefs, Elizabeth S. Dodd writes, “Traherne’s natural innocence participates in a diverse intellectual context surrounding early modern concepts of ‘nature’...Traherne’s treatment of human nature has been identified with a primitivist impulse, in which natural innocence is a ‘pre- or supramoral innocence’ that is ‘morally positive but intellectually negative’, an ignorant state of nature abstracted from the world of experience” (224). It should be noted that Traherne’s description of perfect innocence at conception is a heterodox theological one. In his Summa Theologica, in response to Aquinas’ question “Whether [or not] Man was Created in Grace,” Traherne writes of a “inheritance of grace in human nature” wherein “innate goodness [is] divinely infused into the empty soul by grace” (Dodd 228). This theological stance opposes the orthodox understanding of humanity as inheritors of original sin and, from conception, utterly depraved.
Valuing spiritual inward contemplation void of distraction, Traherne pinpoints deafness as uniquely beneficial as a means of tuning out the world: “For Traherne, to be deaf is to move inward more easily…[Through] deafness and silence…one [is able] to take in God’s works in preparation for a later invasion by breaths that carry the poisonous voices of others” (Nelson and Berens 61). Though Traherne’s reference to deafness seems to more literally apply to a removal from sinful speech, it has natural application to the condition of physical deafness; in Traherne’s equation, an individual born deaf would experience the unique reality of being removed from the temptations of sin born through language. For Traherne, this would be an ideal existence. The removal from human speech as a carrier of sinful temptation lends itself to the primitive withdrawal suggested by Dodd in her article “‘Perfect Innocency by Creation.’” Dodd argues that Traherne’s perception of perfect innocence hearkens to the early modern fascination with the noble savage and the belief, proposed by such philosophers as Pierre Charron or Michel de Montaigne, that individuals would better understand innocence through a return to primitivism and “undoing humanity’s alienation from nature” (Dodd 225). However, the return to nature seemingly invoked by Traherne suggests a return to innocence void of any human language. Rather than being bombarded with human speech, Traherne in “Dumnesse” desires to hear instead “the language of grace” alone, which is attainable through isolation (Dodd 228). Traherne’s total isolation stands in contrast with the isolation experienced through a monastic lifestyle, where likeminded individuals reinforce each other’s beliefs – or superstitions, as Protestants assumed – because Traherne calls for a forced isolation from all other inhabitants of nature so that he can experience an uninhibited relationship with God. An absolute isolation, according to the poem, would emulate the state of neonatal and infantile “dumnesse” preceding the capacity of human speech. Traherne’s self-described “blessed case” in infancy was that “nothing spoke to me but the fair face / Of Heaven and Earth” (17-18).
Traherne’s “blessed case” relates to the early modern theological debates regarding soul formation *ex nihilo* and *ex traduce*. *Ex nihilo* or infusionism theory held that “souls are not made from human generation but are created by God “from nothing” – from no pre-existent human substances or materials – and are then infused individually into the fetus before birth” (Targoff 11). In contrast, *ex traduce* theory or traducianism maintained that “the soul is generated inside the body” (Targoff 82). At first glance, Traherne’s “blessed case” seems to resemble theories of ensoulment, contrary to the orthodox position regarding infusionism, such as the suggestion that the soul can be placed in human bodies after birth. However, Dodd resolutely denies this suggestion:

> Although Traherne adopts several different models for the progress of the soul, according to this framework, it would be broadly incorrect to identify Traherne’s Estate of Innocence with a pre-existent spiritual state of the soul before a “fall” into the body. Although in some of his poems, such as “The Salutation,” Traherne implies the possibility of a pre-existent state before a bodily existence, this is carefully distinguished from the Estate of Innocence. (Dodd 219)

Instead of pre-existence, “Dumnesse” presents a reality of innocence both in utero and before the adoption of human language. The Church of England’s official position was in support of infusionism, and Traherne’s description of his “Estate of Innocence” by all accounts does not contradict infusionism theory. Just as new souls, so John Donne poetically put, “to us are sent / Which learne vice there, and come in innocent” (“To the Countess of Bedford” 59-60), Traherne’s “Dumnesse” describes an untarnished soul that “learne[s] vice” through language. Indeed, Traherne suggests a neonatal and infantile state of innocency – preceding language – where his soul is perverted by language, which he concludes transmits sin. In “Dumnesse,” Traherne states that speech, the “living vehicle of wind” is the means by which individuals “breathe into me their infected mind” and thus “[convey] their souls…into mine” (24-26). In the insinuation that words have the possibility of transmitting a soul from one individual to another, Traherne’s poem aligns with “the ancient

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8 Such is the belief upheld by the Church of Latter Day Saints.
understanding that the soul resides in the breath” (Targoff 25). Traherne’s poem insinuates a kind of infantile innocence, a *tabula rasa* in newborns not yet sensible to human speech; by virtue of avoidance, Traherne claims he was able to evade “infected mind[s]” of sinful men when he only communicated in his infancy with “the fair face / Of Heaven and Earth” (26; 18-19). While “Pre-existence is an era before communication” (Dodd 219), Traherne makes clear in “Dumnesse” that his purported state of innocence involves communication with the Divine, which purifies rather than defiles.

Traherne’s insinuation of an “Estate of Innocence” opposes the orthodox position of Original Sin proposed by Augustine and ultimately accepted after being debated by several church councils (Dodd 219). The difficulty in establishing Traherne’s religious positions once and for all lies with the fact that he “was in the employ of both Puritan and Anglican factions at different stages of his career” (Johnston 378). Traherne was ordained first as a Puritan minister in 1657 and “became one of the conforming clergy in 1660” (Johnston 378). However, on the question of Original Sin, both radical Puritanism and the Established Church of England were in agreement. The position of the Anglican Church on Original Sin was one of confirming the inherent depravity of man, enunciated in article IX of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*: “[Original Sin is] the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is ingendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.” However, Traherne’s description of complete innocence preceding sin-laced language seems to oppose this stance. Instead of describing a predisposition to sin, “naturally… ingendered” in every fetus because of the corruption of the flesh, Traherne posits the “Estate of Innocence” that only becomes corrupted through the acquisition of oral language.
Traherne compounds the debility of deafness with muteness as he designates human speech as the category connecting the two experiences. In both “Dumnesse” and “Silence,” Traherne seems to suggest the capacity of the soul to worship God in utter purity preceding the introduction of human speech. “A quiet silent person may possess / All that is great or high in Blessedness,” says Traherne in “Silence,” for “The inward work is the supreme…The other were occasioned by the fall” (1-4). Hearing a “melody in words” from an “empty voice” or hearing “The sweetest organ, lute, or harp” cannot compare to the capacity men had before speech “To see, approve, take pleasure, and rejoice / Within” (29-32). In these lines, Traherne places high value in the ability to “see, approve, take pleasure, and rejoice” inwardly in God. His estimation of inward sight and hearing overshadows the value he places in the physical capacity to see and hear. The denotation of Traherne’s poems is that “mortal words convey” sin and that individuals were better off when they could not understand them. Though he does not specifically further this application in terms of disability, Traherne’s “blessed case” of sensory deprivation describes the reality of those born deaf. In this way, Traherne’s poetry propounds the unorthodox positions of both infantile innocence and the spiritual benefits of deafness.

It is when Traherne is able to not only hear and understand human speech, but when he also begins to participate in the human language that he describes himself in “Dumnesse” as effectively “break[ing] my Bliss, when my silence, [did] break” (20). “For Traherne,” argue Nelson and Berens, “the internal world is pure and virginal: before the voice invades and takes effect, the life of the mind inside is similar to one spent behind a pulpit. Sins are effectively blocked out before one learns to pay attention to the outer world’s voices” (63). Thus every individual, once inducted into the world of language, is closed off from a previous experience that both allowed isolation from external corruption and permitted one to “dwell within a world of light” (31). Through his desire for that
experience of sensory deprivation, Traherne “begins to imagine an alternative understanding of early modern bodies and minds that both welcomes and needs disability” (Hobgood and Wood 40). As previously discussed, the radical nature of Traherne’s mystic philosophy went largely unnoticed during his lifetime as the majority of his works were published posthumously (his most famous were not published until the early twentieth century). Furthermore, his poetry and prose were not given serious critical attention for centuries following his death. Because of this publication history, Traherne cannot be said to have influenced his seventeenth-century contemporaries through his writing; nonetheless, Traherne’s countercultural elevations of sensory impairment support the notion that certain early modern English individuals were not content to accept societal stigmas of blindness and deafness.

The Religious Necessity of Blindness

Whereas the previous section outlined works by a poet who demonstrated a unique sensitivity to questions of sensory deprivation in addition to rather unorthodox religious positions, this section will primarily concern a writer and theologian who dedicated his book-length study to a woman who had lost her sight. George Hakewill (1578-1649) is known, among other notable accomplishments, for writing *The Vanitie of the Eye* for this unnamed “gentlewoman” who was grieving at the loss of her eyesight. Although we do not know the publication date of the first edition of Hakewill’s *The Vanitie of the Eye*, we do know that within his lifetime Hakewill published revised editions, such as those printed in 1608, 1615, and 1633. Hakewill’s most recognized accomplishment was his appointment as the “personal chaplain to [the young] Prince Charles under James’ instructions” (Anthony Milton 383). A staunch Calvinist, anti-Catholic, and Royalist, Hakewill was personally assigned to this position under the rule of James I and was ordered with another “sober [divine]…never to leave him [Charles I]” so that they might better protect him from
“the inroads of popery” and to keep him on the righteous path of the Protestant faith (“George Hakewill” 7). That Hakewill was specifically a Calvinist in his theological leanings is well established, for Hakewill wrote a religious tract and “cited two different types of evidence in support of the argument that the religion of the Church of England and of Calvin should be judged to be the same” (Anthony Milton 383). Hakewill’s position as a Calvinist and as an appointed minister to the royal family suggests two implications: we can understand Hakewill’s argument in favor of blindness as positioned within a reformed ideology, though unconventional based on his assessment of blindness, and that Hakewill’s argument would most likely have circulated as a respected argument amongst the elite because of his esteemed position.

As previously stated, Hakewill’s The Vanitie of the Eye was “first beganne for the comfort of a gentlewoman bereaved of her sight,” but beyond this, the work could more accurately be described as a religious apology that defends blindness as a spiritual asset. In recent scholarship, Hakewill’s work has been described in punitive rather than positive terms. When the text is read from the perspective of the sighted, Hakewill’s text suddenly becomes an attack on eyesight or what Stuart Clark terms, “ocularphobia” and “the best example of the demolition of Renaissance optimism about vision…Hakewill sought to comfort his dedicatee by removing all eyesight’s privileges as a sense and blaming it for everything that was wrong in the world” (28, 25). Throughout the work Hakewill presents various criticisms of sight, including the propensity for the sighted to be deceived through that sense, tempted to sin because of it, as well as being prone to prideful partiality because of their ability to see. Hakewill poses the question whether or not individuals should consider their

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9 We can see a similar argument demonstrated in the Gloucester plot of King Lear. It is Gloucester’s physical ability to see that brings about error; he is tricked by the sight of a forged letter and self-inflicted wound, both of which Edmund claims occurred at the hands of Edgar. In fact, Gloucester sees more clearly only after he is blinded; it is in the moment of his blinding that he is able to finally recognize that Edmund has betrayed him and that Edgar has been faithful.
sight as a benefit of nature at all. Delving deeper into the spiritual impact of sight, Hakewill ponders if one should instead consider the ability to see as a blight that threatens salvation: “the dangerous abuses which arise from it [the eye] not rightly guided, are so general, and almost inseparable, that it may justly grow to a disputable question whither wee should more regard the benefit of nature in the one, or the hazard of grace and vertue in the other” (1). Hakewill takes one step further than Traherne in the direction of radical support for sensory disability; whereas Traherne’s poetic subject yearns for an imagined moment of time where he was “deaf” to sinful speech and thus indirectly elevates the condition of deafness as a preventative to sin, Hakewill blatantly concludes the sensory capability of “[sight] in use to be more dangerous then necessary” (164) and advocates for blindness as an intrinsic spiritual asset. Hakewill’s perspective of blindness and “comprehensive onslaught on ocularcentrism,” to use Clark’s assessment, diverges wildly from the early modern societal norm to interpret sensory debility as an impediment to faith (26).

The first proof that Hakewill gives in favor of blindness is its ability to deliver the visually impaired individual from a host of temptations that would cause them to sin. For Hakewill, the prayer “lead us not into temptation” primarily concerns the temptations that are stimulated by sight: “we shal meet with more examples of running into mischiefe by the suggestion of this one sense, and more prayers, & precepts bent against the abuse of it, then any of the rest severally, or all of them jointly” (2). The list of “mischiefe” that Hakewill describes seems nearly comprehensive, covering vices from “wantoness” and “gluttony” all the way to sins of “witchcraft” and “apostasie”; however, Hakewill does argue that two of the primary vices particularly assisted and even stimulated by sight are idolatry and pride. He even argues that the sense of sight, rather than verbal temptation by the serpent, was the first prompt for original sin in the Garden of Eden:

[its] first outward occasion…[was in] the fairenesse of the apple apprehended by the womans eie, & the punishment first inflicted on it to have been the opening of the eies,
whether of the minde or the body I dispute not. Whence it may be in the Hebrew the same word signifieth as well an eie as a fountaine; to shew that from it as from a spring or fountaine did flowe both sinne it selfe, the cause of sin, and misery the punishment of both; and because by the eie came the greatest hurt, therefore God hath placed in it the greatest tokens of sorrow. For from it comes teares, by which the expressing of sorrow is peculiar to man alone. (42)

Inferring a commonly held early modern argument regarding the fall of man, Hakewill implicates Eve as the progenitor of sin. However, unlike most early modern thinkers, Hakewill furthers his argumentation by positing that the Fall began not by taste, but by sight. The fruit from the forbidden tree that Milton describes in *Paradise Lost* is tantalizing – “which to behold / Might tempt alone” (*Paradise Lost* IX.735) – along these lines, Hakewill argues in his earlier work that there was an element of visual temptation in the fruit.¹⁰ Though Milton describes the fruit as lovely, he illustrates that the real temptation for Eve comes with the serpent’s suggestion of wisdom and power equal to divinity. Hakewill, however, argues forcefully that sight was the very “fountaine” from which “sinne it selfe, the cause of sin, and misery the punishment of both” all flowed (42). Perhaps the most intriguing portion of his argument lies in his assertion that God purposefully created the biological capacity for tears so that humanity would be reminded that from the eyes came their ultimate fall into a state of sinfulness.

Having proposed sight as a primary mover in the Original Sin, Hakewill advances his apologetic stance in opposition to sight and in favor of blindness. The nuances of Hakewill’s argument suggest several more proofs in defense of blindness; namely, that people with sight are unable to mask their vices (which can be perceived in their eyes), that the deprivation of one sense heightens the others, that blinded individuals are divested of visual biases (making them the perfect candidates for the legal position of judges in court), and finally that blindness provides an innate

¹⁰ The visual appeal of the apple leads to the “opening of the eies,” and upon stating this phrase, Hakewill refuses to speculate whether the “opening of the eies” should be interpreted as a figurative realization of sin in Eve’s and Adam’s minds or rather as a matter of physically defogging their sight – almost as if innocence was a cataract removed from their eyes, and once removed, they are able to see their own nakedness.
ability of “flight & avoidance” of “shameful spectacles which at every turning present themselves” (144). Firstly, perhaps in reference to the Petrarchan themes recognizable in Elizabethan poetry, Hakewill discusses the danger that the eyes pose. Rather than describing shafts of love launched from the Petrarchan lady’s eyes that wound the lover and ensnare him, Hakewill instead discusses the eyes as an open window revealing the soul’s true intentions. He argues that the eyes act “as secret intelligencers, in moral matters” and often betray an individual’s vices without their recognition or intention (89). Hakewill claims that the eyes betray the soul by “discovering her weaknesse to the world. Thus by a fierce sparkling eie, we discover anger; by an open staring eie, unstaidnes: by a rowling unsettled eie wantonnesse; by a hollow wan eie, envy and jealousie” (90). Thus in more than leading one into temptation, the eyes can betray one’s very temptations and sins. Because of this, Hakewill argues that eyes that are closed in blindness or clouded by blindness protect the blind individual’s sin from being detected. Admittedly, this argument is odd because it suggests that individuals should avoid transparency regarding their own sins. Because of a specific avoidance of transparency, this particular proof is the most self-seeking defense in favor of blindness. For many people, masking their vices with blindness might not have been a strong enough incentive to rejoice in their debility. However, Hakewill’s proofs move beyond the defensive camouflaging of vices to a more active preventative to sin.

Utilizing the line of reasoning akin to the notion that the loss of sight works to enhance the strength of the remaining physical senses, Hakewill posits his second proof in his elevation of blindness: that the loss of the physical eye’s sight enhances the “eyes” of intellect and faith. The understanding that “one Sense will oftentimes supply the office and want of another” was not unknown in the early modern era, and for example was made by the natural philosopher Kenelm Digby in his work *Two Treatises* and was reasserted again by John Bulwer in his 1648 apology,
Hakewill likewise reasons, “when the eie of the outward sense, growes dull, & dim, the intellectuall eie of reason, and the spirituall eie of faith, grow more fresh, and cleare” (131). In other words, when one’s physical sight is impaired, they become a subject more defined by interiority, and their wisdom and faith become sharpened. Relying perhaps on the logical thread that sight is tantamount to worldly independence, Hakewill seems to suggest that the condition of blindness forces a dependency on the Divine that able-bodied individuals are unable to replicate in their own experiences. In this way too, the “spirituall eie of faith” is able to grow stronger as the blind rely more on God for succor.

Furthermore, according to Hakewill, as the eye of reason and discernment grows stronger, it provides the opportunity for blind individuals to function in the capacity of judges. With the removal of sight, one can prove less partial or less biased, rendering them the perfect candidates in the courts of law: “thus much my selfe dare confidently affirme, that the want of sight is many times the occasion of cutting of partiall respects, then which nothing is more inwardly necessarie to the office, and rightful proceeding of a judge” (104). In a society that still conditionally advocated for a cosmological system of correspondences, individuals who suffered from physical impairments, deformities, or other aesthetic disadvantages were often judged harshly on the basis of physiognomy. Thus, a deformed individual might be assumed to have a mutilated soul, misshapen by sin. Recognizing this ideological framework, though it seems Hakewill does not accept it himself, Hakewill argues that physically blind judges would dispense justice more fairly than sighted ones because they would not fall prey to bias depending upon physical appearance. Hakewill proposes that the tendency to judge individuals by appearance creates a false bias that might condemn

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11 As previously discussed, “The concept of a mutual influence or link between body and soul...As a ‘science’, physiognomy has antecedents in classical antiquity, where the character of a person and their physical appearance was [sic] seen to be connected” (Metzler 54).
otherwise innocent victims. The English societies of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century were ostensibly self-aware of this tradition of belief that they had inherited from their medieval ancestors; after all, many literary works, like Hakewill’s direct response in *The Vanitie of the Eye*, hinge on the concept of physiognomic correspondence even while they put its ideological foundation under pressure. Perhaps the most well-known depictions of physiognomy and the apparent confirmations or rejections of it are seen in the dramatic works of Shakespeare, such as in *Othello*, *Richard III*, or *The Tempest*, among others. Notably, it was also at the turn of the fifteenth century, and popularized largely in the sixteenth century, that artistic renderings of the Roman goddess Justitia – known commonly as Lady Justice – began to feature the goddess wearing a blindfold, literalizing the concept that true justice is blind. As Martin Jay confirms in his book chapter “Must Justice be Blind?,” “suddenly at the end of the fifteenth century a blindfold began to be placed over the goddess’s eyes, producing what has rightly been called ‘the most enigmatic of the attributes of Justice.’” (19). Though the depiction at first carried an inherent satirical implication, by 1530 “the blindfold was transformed into a positive emblem of impartiality and equality before the law” (Jay 20). Furthering this popularized metaphor of blind justice, Hakewill renders the metaphor literal by arguing that the physical condition of blindness proves crucial in the dispensation of justice: “nothing is more inwardly necessarie to the office, and rightful proceeding of a judge [than blindness]” (104).13

12 Though certainly the “Moor” Othello receives persecution solely because of his skin color (appearance), Othello’s actions and character prompt other Caucasian characters to vouch for his virtue. Similarly, both Richard III and Caliban are persecuted for their appearance and assumed to be wicked because of their nonnormative bodies – it is perhaps their respective ill-treatment that influences their decisions to fulfill others’ assumptions in this regard.

13 This particular proof in his apology also offers a counterargument to the stereotypical positioning of the impaired as dependent and incapable of earning any living outside of beggary.
Finally, Hakewill’s last proposition is that blindness naturally renders an individual capable of perpetually “fleeing” from sins provoked by sight, causing it to be a “commodity…even to be wished for” (144-145). Hakewill asserts that “since there is no hope of flying from the beholding of base and shameful spectacles which at every turning present themselves (the raigne of vice, & banishment of virtue, being every where alike) the losse of the sight, may serve for a kinde of flight & avoidance of them: & by consequent to a minde virtuously disposed, of comfort & and contentment” (144-145). The implications of the directive of Christ – “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:29, King James Bible) – are realized in the case of Hakewill’s friend, the recipient of his book-length apology for blindness. She has become blind and is no longer subject to the temptations that would then prompt her to “pluck…out” her eyes to save her soul. Drawing from the foundational understanding in this passage that eyesight can stimulate sin and that blindness may prevent it, Hakewill describes blindness as “a kinde of flight & avoidance of [shameful spectacles]” and states that the blinded may thus find “comfort & and contentment” in it (145). Beyond the ability for the blind to escape the snares of temptation caused by “base and shameful spectacles,” Hakewill suggests that, should they recognize the gifts given to them because of their loss of sight, the blinded will in the end be characterized by minds “virtuously disposed” and lives marked by “comfort & and contentment” (144-45). For these reasons too, Hakewill argues, blindness is a reality “Devoutly to be wished” and that ultimately it would be better for a person to be blind rather than sighted.14

14 In a similarly jarring line of reasoning that proposes the elevation of an otherwise undesirable reality, Hamlet describes death as an eternal sleep and a “consummation / Devoutly to be wished” (Hamlet III.i.63).
Rather than agreeing with Hakewill’s elevation of physical blindness (and spiritual illumination), John Donne expresses in a sermon preached in front of King Charles in 1627 that deafness is in fact more spiritually appealing than blindness. Donne speaks of the anxiety and sin that hearing can spur and, as Nelson and Berens argue, Donne asserts that “hearing is inescapably dangerous, and deafness – the only escape from the dangers of hearing – an unattainable fantasy” (60). In his sermon, Donne states in reference to Matthew 5:29 that whereas one might pluck out one’s eyes to avoid the sins of sight, that it is impossible for one to cut off one’s ears to avoid the sins caused by hearing: “[Christ] does not name nor mention the ear: for, if the ear betray thee, though thou do cut it off, yet thou art open to that way of treason still, still thou canst hear” (qtd. in Nelson and Berens 59). The original Biblical suggestion of voluntary impairment as a means to avoid sin is propounded by Donne and extended to the question of deafness. Donne’s argument is not nearly as blatant as Hakewill’s outright defense of blindness, and one must infer (as Nelson and Berens do) that Donne’s statement regarding the removal of the ears is wishful thinking rather than simply a stated matter of fact. Donne details that removing the ears – or in other words, voluntary deafness – is impossible, whereas one may voluntary blind themselves to avoid visual temptation.15 Because one cannot completely remove the temptations caused by hearing, Donne’s resounding response to his quandary is that individuals must “Take heed what you hear” (qtd. in Nelson and Berens 60). Whereas Hakewill’s preoccupation seems to be the elevation of blindness for spiritual wellbeing, Donne’s sermon suggests – as Nelson and Berens infer – that deafness, though impossible to attain, would potentially be a spiritual advantage to the early modern Christian.

15 Although Donne speaks of the removal of the ears as a voluntary act that would render one deaf, which suggests a misunderstanding of the biological components of hearing, other natural philosophers of the mid-seventeenth century expressed a basic understanding of the tympanum and its function for hearing. I discuss William Holder’s experiments regarding the eardrum in the following chapter.
Experiencing Blindness and Deafness

Under the medieval church, society attributed the conditions of sensory disability to the individual sinfulness of those impaired. Accounts of disability during the Middle Ages markedly imply sin as the trigger for disability; the early modern perception of disability as a result of sin still appears in extant religious texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. However, in large part contrasted with medieval viewpoints, reformed Protestant discourse in the early modern era adamantly points to the universal fallenness of mankind rather than emphasizing any one individual’s own personal religious transgressions. While the viewpoint characteristic of the Middle Ages often interpreted the punishment for sin in terms of individualized fault, reformed theology more often saw illness, disability, and other physical torment as a result of the general primal Fall. Thus, under a reformed worldview, while the cause of disabilities was still perceived in part due to sin, the rhetoric with which such sin was discussed became more generalized: rather than discussing the sins of men, early modern theological writing more often spoke of the sins of mankind.16

John Milton’s eyesight deteriorated steadily throughout the Civil War and early interregnum until he experienced profound blindness “early in 1652” (Rumrich 95). Consequently, many of his latter works contemplate the significance of vision or lack of it, and Samson Agonistes is perhaps his most well-known work related to blindness as its principle character is the blinded Samson from the book of Judges. Although Samson Agonistes predominantly aligns with Protestant theology in its depiction of free will, Milton’s explanation for the cause of blindness in Samson Agonistes does not conform to the original religious model of disabilities of the sixteenth-century Established Church of

16 Whereas the play The Historie of Jacob and Esau firmly depicts this very relationship, Samson Agonistes proves a bit more complicated. Part of the difficulty of placing Samson Agonistes squarely within this tradition of Protestant discourse is Milton’s own biography (because his own personal experience with blindness may have challenged traditional beliefs); furthermore, the Biblical account of Samson itself leaves little room but to interpret Samson’s blindness as a result of his outrageous misplaced trust in Delilah. Finally, it would be difficult to place a play into a discourse of the established church of England when the playwright himself held famously heterodox religious views.
England. In addition to *Samson Agonistes*, Milton’s works demonstrate a resistance to religious uniformity of thought, and this specific diversity in religious thought also reflects a large part of seventeenth-century England. The religious dissention demonstrated in Milton’s various works was further demonstrated through the explosion of Protestant sects in the seventeenth century. Early modern religious dissention paved the way for more transgressive interpretations of deafness and blindness to be introduced in seventeenth-century English literature. The Reformation continued in the seventeenth century; more frequently, Christians avowing various iterations of the Protestant tradition defined and redefined their faith, and this variability in religious belief also supplemented the metamorphosis of the early modern religious model of disabilities. In terms of *Samson Agonistes*, Samson’s blindness is not attributed to a state of universal fallenness; likewise, his blindness is also not described in terms of God’s wrath. In line with a more medieval conception of blindness as a result of sinfulness, Samson is credited with unlimited free will, and as freely as Samson makes his own errors, so freely he falls.\(^\text{17}\) Further, Samson takes responsibility for his blindness, admitting the ways that his poor choices, made with complete free will, inevitably lead to his own capture and blinding. Instead of defining his impairment solely in terms of divine will, as arguably became the most common explanation for sensory impairment in the early modern world, Milton’s work primarily positions Samson’s blindness in terms of his own actions and largely departs from describing blindness in terms of a universal predisposition for sin. More important than Milton’s explanation for the cause of Samson’s blindness, especially in light of Milton’s own blindness, is his defense of it. In *Samson Agonistes*, Samson’s blindness comes about in consequence of his misplaced

\footnotesize{\hspace{2pt}
\begin{itemize}
  \item This phrasing alludes to *Paradise Lost* III.102: “Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.”
\end{itemize}}
trust in Dalila. Moreover, it becomes the means by which Samson takes the Philistines by surprise, inevitably bringing about their downfall and the deliverance of Israel. Samson refuses to equate his blindness with weakness, and in fact – contra the Biblical account – Samson regains his supernatural strength before the culminating event of his death in *Samson Agonistes*. Furthermore, Samson’s blindness also becomes a spiritual asset because it allows for his gaining new recognition of the truth; it was through sight that he was tempted and most misled by Dalila’s beauty, and it is in his blindness that he gains newfound wisdom and direction.

*Samson Agonistes* is recognized as one of the last works that John Milton published; it was published in tandem with *Paradise Regained* in 1671, three years before Milton’s death. In Milton’s retelling of the Old Testament narrative of Samson, the plot focuses on a small portion of Judges 16, expanding the seven verses into a fictional recasting of the events on the day that Samson brings destruction upon the Philistines. Preceding his capture, blinding, and enforced slavery, Samson has

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18 Here, and throughout my discussion of *Samson Agonistes*, I use “Delilah” to refer to the character in the Biblical account in Judges 16, and “Dalila” to refer to Milton’s character in *Samson Agonistes*.

19 This fact is important in the play, for the Israelites must know that they did not bring about their own deliverance from the Philistines.

20 In Judges 16, the narrative specifically states that Samson’s hair regrows (Judges 16:22); however, it does not state that his strength returns with his regrown hair. This lack of clarity has stimulated several interpretations of this passage: some critics and biblical interpreters, such as Milton, read the regrowth of Samson’s hair as a sign of his simultaneously returning strength. Other critics disagree with this interpretation, claiming instead that the return of Samson’s strength depends upon a return of God’s favor (which they argue, does not occur until his final prayer). My reading of Judges 16 aligns with this latter interpretation. While leaning against the pillars, Samson must explicitly pray for strength to slay the Philistines – “And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once” (emphasis mine, Judges 16:28). Rather than reading “only this once” as indicative that Samson intends his final act to be suicidal, I read the prayer as indicative that Samson’s strength has not returned prior to this prayer, so he must specifically entreat God for its return. In this way, verse 29 verifies that the loss of Samson’s supernatural strength in the Biblical narrative was a permanent consequence of his broken covenant and was only reversed because of Samson’s specific prayer and a revisiting of God’s favor.

21 Again, we see a reiteration of the thematic underpinnings of the Gloucester subplot in that Samson’s perspective is never clearer than after he has been blinded.
repeatedly wreaked havoc upon the Philistines. After marrying Delilah, Philistine lords proposition
her to discover the secret of Samson’s strength so that they might gain the upper hand. After three
false leads, Samson finally reveals the truth and secret to his strength; unsurprisingly, Delilah betrays
his confidence again, and he is subsequently overpowered and enslaved by the Philistines.

There are notable differences between the original Bible story and Milton’s closet drama that
become venues to analyze Milton’s thematic insinuations. In the original tale, the shearing of
Samson’s hair results indisputably in his lost strength, and though his hair begins to regrow, his
strength is not stated to have returned with it. After Samson’s capture, he is put to work to “grind in
the prison house,” a task in the ancient near east that was almost exclusively reserved for women,
the meanest of servants, and slaves. As the grinding of grain was labor undertaken principally by
women, readers can intuit that Samson’s supernatural strength would not have been a necessity for
accomplishing the menial task. In contrast, Milton’s narrative suggests that the regrowth of
Samson’s hair brings with it a return of his supernatural strength, for the crowd of Philistines gather
solely that “Samson should be brought forth to shew the people / Proof of his mighty strength in
feats and games” (Samson Agonistes 1601-1602). Milton’s rendering has the Philistines demanding a
show of strength from Samson while the Philistines in the original account simply want Samson to
“make [them] sport” on account of his blindness (Judges 16:27). This also stands as indicative that
Samson’s mighty strength returns as his hair grows in Samson Agonistes, for there would be no reason
for masses to gather to witness Samson’s “mighty strength” if it was a fact that he had irrevocably

22 When “grinding” or “milling” is referenced in the Bible, most passages include reference to women, such
as Exodus 11:5 (”even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill”), Job 31:10 (”Then let
my wife grind [grain] unto another”), or Matthew 24:41 (”Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one
shall be taken, and the other left”).

23 Similar “entertainment” at the expense of the blind is retold in Wheatley’s Stumbling Blocks before the Blind,
where in “an expensive, carefully planned production, requiring not only a pig but a painted banner and a
drum,” four blind men are given sticks to kill a pig but inevitably flog each other rather than the pig (2).
lost it. Furthermore, in Samson’s final speech – recounted by Manoa – Samson refers to the feats of strength he has accomplished before the Philistines. Most likely, Samson referred to the “labour” he had completed while working in the Philistines’ “publick Mill” (1327). The Messenger avers in his retelling of Samson’s final speech that Samson announced to the Philistines, “of my own accord such other tryal / I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater; / As with amaze shall strike all who behold” (1643-45). Because of this, Samson’s threat in response to Harapha of Gath’s mockery seems to be substantiated by his still extant supernatural strength. Harapha, the ancestor of the infamous Goliath, declares that it is Samson’s blindness and squalor that make him unfit as an opponent: “To combat with a blind man I disdain, / And thou hast need much washing to be toucht” (1106-7). Samson, however, rejects the insinuation that his blindness is a cause for weakness and accuses Harapha of cowardice:

Go baffl’d coward, lest I run upon thee,
Though in these chains, bulk without spirit vast,
And with one buffet lay thy structure low,
Or swing thee in the Air, then dash thee down
To the hazard of thy brains and shatter’d sides. (1237-41)

Samson’s residual strength, despite his blindness, merits special attention because of its symbolic significance; namely, that Samson does not consider his lack of eyesight as an impediment to his strength or capability. In his depiction of blindness in Samson Agonister, Milton never equates blindness with weakness. This tendency is also demonstrated in Milton’s other works, such as in his sonnet to Cyriack Skinner and in the invocation to Book III of Paradise Lost.

Because of Milton’s own blindness, any depiction of sensory impairment is especially significant when held up to portrayals of sensory debility from authors who have never experienced what it is to be impaired. Milton himself faced indictments as a result of his blindness – Barbara Lewalski writes extensively on the fact that Royalists argued Milton’s blindness was punishment
from God for supporting the Parliamentary cause.  

Strangely enough, this libel directed at Milton would have been a more conventionally Catholic interpretation for the cause of his blindness, wielded nonetheless by Protestants. Milton was “ridicul[ed]…for having ‘scribbled his eyes out,’” advocating for a political upheaval that ultimately was a lost cause (Censure qtd. in Rumrich 96). In his epistolary sonnet to Cyriack Skinner, Milton’s explanation for blindness seems to similarly align with his representation of Samson. Both Milton and his Samson openly identify their blindness as self-inflicted. This perspective on blindness proves counter-cultural because it indicates a desire to exhibit individual control over the existence of the impairment. Samson claims himself as “Sole Author I, sole cause” (376), and in Milton’s own life, Milton readily acknowledges his blindness as evidence of his political accomplishments. However, Milton does not allow that his blindness could be misconstrued as a punishment for his activism; rather, he describes it as a sacrifice he’s had to make to accomplish his political ends. Milton makes this clear in the Defensio Secunda when he insists

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24 See, for instance, Regii Sanguinis Clamor ad Coelum Adversus Parricidas Anglicanos (or The Cry of the Royal Blood to Heaven Against the English Parricides), which was published anonymously in 1652 and has since been attributed to Peter du Moulin. Milton published his own response, Joannis Miltoni Angli Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio Secunda (The Second Defense of the People of England Against an Anonymous Libel) in 1654. For more information, see Lewalski’s The Life of John Milton. Likewise, see John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes. Silverman Jr. also records the excoriation of Milton by his enemies, such as du Moulin’s admission that “I looked on in silence, and not without a soft chuckle, and seeing my bantling laid at another man’s door, and the blind and furious Milton fighting and slashing the air…not knowing by whom he was struck and whom he struck in return” (qtd. in Silverman Jr. 71). In addition to the “joke” that du Moulin saw himself playing on Milton, attributing Milton’s blindness directly to his inability to discover the identity of his libeler, Milton was also described as a “general failure” when Alexander More labeled him as a “Cyclops manqué” (Lewalski Life qtd. in Silverman Jr. 71). As Silverman Jr. accurately concludes, “Milton was baited into performing his blindness for the entertainment of men like More, du Moulin, and later Samuel Parker” (72). Although Milton is recorded to have known that the text was not written by More, he still went forward with his own published response.

25 In Angelica Duran’s “The Blind Bard, According to John Milton and His Contemporaries,” she notes the convincing argument that “To Mr. Cyriack Skinner upon his Blindness” was not published in 1673 because he had specifically referenced his political advocacy as the cause of his blindness (147).
“when faced with the alternative either to withdraw from his work and save his sight or to work on and lose it, he chose to go on as much from religious conviction as from patriotism” (Slakey 26).

As previously stated, Milton seemed to wear his blindness as a badge of pride that proves the extent of his political activism: “What supports me, dost thou ask? / The conscience, friend, to have lost [my sight] overplied / In liberty’s defence, my noble task” (“Sonnet to Cyriack Skinner” 9-11). Similar to Samson, Milton also makes it clear that he does not resent divine will – “I argue not / Against Heav’n’s hand or will, not bate a jot / Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer / Right onward” (6-9). This statement can be interpreted one of two ways: firstly, Milton might be saying that he recognizes his blindness as a matter of divine will but that he does not place blame on this will, or secondly, Milton might be stating that he will not take time in the sonnet to address the popular arguments regarding impairment as a matter of divinely-ordained will. Regardless of how to read the first half of this statement, Milton’s conclusion is the same: he will “still bear up and steer / Right onward” (“Sonnet to Cyriack Skinner” 8-9). He not so subtly seems as proud and “content” for his propagandist defense of the commonwealth as he is of his fame: “all Europe talks from side to side. / This thought might lead me through the world’s vain mask” (12-13). Therefore, in both Samson Agonistes and “Sonnet to Cyriack Skinner,” Milton provides defenses of blindness. In Samson Agonistes, Milton demonstrates how blindness cannot automatically be considered a weakness, for it certainly does not impede Samson’s victory over the Philistines. Furthermore, in “Sonnet to Cyriack Skinner,” Milton indicates how rather than a point of disgrace, blindness has become a visible testament for the action he took in life.

26 Slakey goes further in his argument by positing that Milton’s sonnet “On His Blindness” should not be read solely as a means of Milton resigning himself to his blindness; rather, Slakey argues that Milton expresses “some kind of spiritual growth” brought about because of his blindness (130).
Furthermore, Milton champions blindness by describing how it might serve as a religious and political asset. In Milton’s sonnet “When I Consider How my Light is Spent,” the speaker of the poem (arguably Milton himself) first despairs at the possibility that blindness will render “that one talent which is death to hide…useless, though my soul more bent / To serve therewith my Maker, and present / My true account” (3-5) before describing his current condition as a “mild yoke” (11). Milton comes to the conclusion that he can continue in his own role as God’s champion in his publications and reminds himself that “God doth not need / Either man’s work or His own gifts. Who best / Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best….They also serve who only stand and wait” (9-14). In *Samson Agonistes*, Samson may not flourish his blindness as a monument to his political activism, but he also refuses to see his blindness as an impediment to his own effective agency. Milton portrays a determined “strength in seeming weakness” in his Samson, who challenges Harapha the giant from Gath in the role of God’s “Champion bold…Then thou shalt see, or rather to thy sorrow / Soon feel, whose God is strongest, thine or mine” (2 Corinthians 12:9; *Samson Agonistes* 1152-55). Despite his blindness, Samson still retains his supernatural strength and his complete faith in God. Even in blindness, Samson declares his trust in God to use him in a way that will bring about the supernatural prophecy spoken before his birth as the deliverer of the Israelites out of Philistine captivity.

27 This conversation should remind the reader of similar statements made by the young shepherd, David, who faced Goliath with the challenge: “Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcases of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. And all this assembly shall know that the LORD saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give you into our hands” (1 Samuel 17:45-47). Readers of *Samson Agonistes* may not have recognized Harapha when Samson issues his own challenge as God’s champion; however, Milton makes it clear after Harapha’s exit that he is the “Father of five Sons / All of Gigantic size, Goliah [sic.] chief,” and thus relates the stories through their heroes and villains (1248-49).
The response of the Chorus to Samson’s condition reveals standard early modern perceptions of sensory impairment. Echoing the Chorus’ wail in *Oedipus Rex*, “Thou wert better dead than living blind” (1:125), the Chorus in *Samson Agonistes* describes his blindness as worse than imprisonment because it has made Samson a “Dungeon of they self; thy Soul...Imprison’d now indeed, / In real darkness of the body dwells, / Shut up from outward light” (156-160). Though Samson had expressed much the same immediately before the Chorus voiced it, as soon as the Chorus hazards to cast judgments upon Samson’s condition, Samson refuses to accept their conclusion. Samson responds to their first lamentation, and his opinion changes drastically as he begins to state the benefits he might garner because of his blindness:

    Yet that which was the worst now least afflicts me,
    Blindness, for had I sight, confus’d with shame,
    How could I once look up, or heave the head,
    Who like a foolish Pilot have shipwrack’t,
    My Vessel trusted to me from above,
    Gloriously rigg’d. (195-200)

Samson admits of his own “foolish Pilot[ing]” which drove him to destruction but states explicitly that whereas blindness seemed the worst effect of his poor choices, it now afflicts him least. As he later details, the remembrance of his captivity due to his blind devotion to Dalila now causes him the greatest affliction.

Samson’s admission of his own “foolish Pilot[ing]” serves as only one example of the various expressions of blindness and its explanations in *Samson Agonistes*. For the most part, Milton pays special attention to discussing blindness in terms of human choice or chance, existing within the omnipotent will of God, rather than solely discussing blindness as a matter of unfair punishment or enigmatic divine will, existing independently from human choice. Throughout the work, which functions as a theological debate regarding free will in man and the predetermined will of God, Samson only serves as one side of a broader conversation. Samson declares that God has
orchestrated several realities in his life – he relates that his election as a Nazarite and the bestowing of supernatural strength were all matters of God’s will, and Samson repeats the mantra – “peace, I must not quarrel with the will / Of highest dispensation” (60-61). Here, Samson does not deny God’s will over his life but readily accepts it. In more than his ultimate blinding, Samson also acknowledges God’s will in his status as a Nazarite and in the prophecy that preceded his birth: that “he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines” (Judges 13:5). In his opening monologue, Samson ponders how he can possibly achieve the prophesied “great exploits” for which he has been “order’d,” “prescrib’d,” and “Design’d” now that he is enslaved with “both my Eyes put out” (30-32). The text carries the implied answer that his blindness cannot prevent his agency but at the same time suggests that the annihilation of the Philistines at the close of the closet drama was destined, for in being “Betray’d, Captiv’d, and both [his] Eyes put out,” Samson is perfectly positioned to take the Philistines by surprise at their banquet (33).

Though Samson acknowledges the role of “highest dispensation” in his life, he also asserts the role he himself played in bringing about his blinding. This stance aligns with the Arminian doctrine espoused by God the Father in Paradise Lost, for Samson – “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (III.99) – makes his own choices and must face the consequences of his actions. From the mouth of God in Paradise Lost, Milton argues his stance against predestination:

So [man] were created [with freedom of choice], nor can justly accuse
Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate,
As if predestination over-rul'd
Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree
Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.
So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,
Or aught by me immutable foreseen,
They trespass, Authors to themselves in all
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
I form'd them free, and free they must remain,
Till they enthral themselves: I else must change
Thir nature, and revoke the high Decree
Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordain'd
Thir freedom, they themselves ordain'd thir fall. (*Paradise Lost* III.112-128)

This posture regarding predestination aligns with reformed outlooks on Election and free will, though it seems to compliment multiple interpretations. Milton is notoriously known as an individual with complicated religious views: because of this, Nicholas von Maltzahn describes Milton as an “independently minded Protestant” who “long tested” “biblicism…with his habits of free-thinking” and who “often demand[ed] reconception of religion” (43-46). His own open-minded Protestant beliefs most likely prompted him to defend general “Protestant toleration” in *Of True Religion* (Maltzahn 47).  

In the case of free will and Protestant theology, Milton’s depiction in *Samson Agonistes* seems to compliment both a Lutheran and Arminian outlook even as his explanation for Samson’s blindness hearkens back to the medieval model of disabilities in its allowance for impairment as a consequence for particular sin. For Luther, the will of men was in bondage to God’s will, and while a person may elect to act well, God’s will is the ultimate cause of any good action. In other words, only with God’s grace can one act well. In contrast, Arminius allowed for more liberality regarding free will by arguing that humans would often choose rightly and wrongly, but that their choices did not reflect their salvation. In contrast with Luther and Calvin, Arminius argued that God’s grace was sufficient to cover a multitude of sins and that one’s choices were not evidence of election: the “elect” were not divinely predetermined but included anyone who chose to put their faith in Christ.  

Good works were not evidence of election but rather an indication of a changed heart. In other

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28 Extremely well-versed in Mosaic and New Testament doctrine, Milton has been known to focus upon Biblical passages that support his personal opinions – such as in his defense of divorce in *Areopagitica*, wherein he relies on Levitical law and ignores Pauline admonitions against it in order to make his case in favor of divorce.
words, Arminius argued the case for the efficacy of moral works in the believer’s salvation though neither as proof positive of election nor as a means of dutifully working out one’s salvation on a matter of merit.

Samson’s error is that he chooses to tell Dalila the secret of his supernatural strength, and this brings about the loss of it. In revealing the secret of his supernatural strength to Dalila, Samson inadvertently breaks his oath to God. Samson recognizes the removal of God’s favor as he describes his situation in terms of intimate friendship (and a broken promise). After breaching God’s trust by revealing the secret of his supernatural strength, Samson tells Manoa: “Appoint not heavenly disposition, Father, / Nothing of all these evils hath befall’n me / But justly; I my self have brought them on” (373-75). As if this statement is not clear enough, Samson immediately reiterates his own actions as the cause of his current condition: “Sole Author I, sole cause” (376) and later declares in a statement that can readily apply to scriptural commandments and echoes God the Father in Book III of Paradise Lost, “Commands are no constraints. If I obey them, / I do it freely” (emphasis mine, 1372-73). Samson states again that both his blindness and his captivity under Philistine rule was a result of his own actions and his own choices. In Samson Agonistes, God never forbids Samson from revealing the secret of his strength; rather, the only requirement God gives to the Nazarite is that “no razor shall come on his head” (Judges 13:5). Samson does not actively break his Nazarite pledge; instead, the breaking of the pledge occurs as a consequence of Samson’s own misplaced trust.

Samson’s “sin” (or perhaps more accurately, “foolishness”) does not run counter to Luther’s beliefs because Samson’s actions seem to prove that he cannot make good decisions without God’s grace. Furthermore, the end of the work dictates that Samson fulfills the prophecy (or will of God): “Living or dying thou hast fulfill’d / The work for which thou wast foretold” (1660-61). In other words, God’s will remains omnipotent despite men’s actions. In fact, within both Calvinist and
Lutheran paradigms, Samson’s decisions to marry Philistine women and to tell Delilah the secret of his supernatural strength (which by all appearances would be sinful errors) may have been the means by which God effects the massacre of the Philistines. Likewise, Samson’s error does not contradict an Arminian perspective because Samson reiterates that he has absolute free will and because of this he repeatedly chooses wrong. However, Samson’s blindness as a result of his errors does result in his blindness, which Samson claims responsibility for; because of this, the explanation for Samson’s blindness – in religious terms – also doesn’t contradict the Catholic mode of interpreting the cause of disabilities.

The trust God places in Samson as a Nazarite seems as misplaced as Samson’s trust in Dalila; both Samson and Dalila ultimately disappoint the one who has entrusted them with knowledge and the power over that knowledge. Samson sees his current blindness and captivity as justice for betraying God’s “counsel”: “his holy secret / Presumptuously [I] have publish’d, impiously, / Weakly at least, and shamefully” (497-499). And at this point, Samson tells his father to let him continue to do penance in his shame: “let me here, / As I deserve” (488-89). The nuances of these statements lend some confusion to the matter because Samson uses the terminology of “punishment.” It is important to note that he describes his punishment as both self-inflicted and deserved: “All these indignities, for such they are / From thine, these evils I deserve and more” (1168-69). In an effort to reestablish his prior relationship with God, Samson determines that he will remain a captive of the Philistines, but within that captivity, Samson makes it clear that he is waiting for an opportunity for God to use him again. Regardless of the hand Samson played in bringing about his blindness, the plot indicates that God in his mercy still forgives and uses Samson to liberate the Israelites from the Philistines.
In various ways, Samson reiterates the theme “Whom have I to complain of but my self?” which seems to complement a Catholic approach to individual sinfulness and its immediate consequences (46). This confessional stance is taken beyond reasonable doubt after Manoa – another conversant in this theological dialogue – questions the justness of the will of God:

Alas methinks whom God hath chosen once
To worthiest deeds, if he through frailty err,
He should not so o’rewhelm, and as a thrall
Subject him to so foul indignities,
Be it but for honours sake of former deeds. (368-72)

Reiterating his belief that Samson’s condition has come about because of the will of God, Manoa questions that will and later criticizes it. Manoa describes God’s favor as inconstant, that through mere whim God’s favor will turn: “Nor only dost degrade them, or remit / To life obscur’d, which were a fair dismission, / But throw’st them lower then thou didst exalt them high” (687-89). While Manoa censures the inconstancy of God’s will even as he argues in favor of its existence, the Chorus represents a more traditional reformed position on free will and predestination as they not only admit belief in God’s predestined will, but also fully champion it: “Just are the ways of God, / And justifiable to Men” (293-94). And yet, Samson’s response to Manoa’s grief-induced rebellion against the right will of God on the one hand and the Chorus’s profound promotion and unquestioning affirmation on the other is shocking in its dismissal of the historically prevailing concept of impairment as ordained by God. Manoa and the Chorus both believe that every facet of life falls under the veil of God’s will with little to no influence at man’s command – including the reality of Samson’s blindness. Though Manoa and the Chorus come to different conclusions regarding the

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29 Because of the relationship of the sympathetic characters to the blinded, the reactions of grief seem more representative of familial loyalty and love than of societal compulsion. Because of this fact and the general lack of charitable responses to genuine disability in the other plays we’ve discussed, this particular response can largely be interpreted as a matter of loyalty rather than a general societal conditioned response.
justice of that will, Samson presents his own argument that though God’s will prevails, humans have free will and their actions have consequences.

To better explicate how Samson’s narrative of free will, blindness, and God’s omnipotence departs from more traditional reformed interpretation (represented by the Chorus in *Samson Agonistes*), one need only contrast the depiction of Isaac’s blindness in *The Historie of Jacob and Esau* with Milton’s depiction of Samson’s blindness in *Samson Agonistes*. Because careful attention is paid to specifically outlining the “godly” character of Isaac, it renders impossible a reading of Isaac’s impairment as a condition of individual sinfulness. Near the beginning of the play, Isaac’s neighbors, Zethar and Hanan, complain of Esau’s behavior as “dissolute and…idle” (I.ii). Zethar poses the question of whether Isaac is at fault for his son’s behavior, but Hanan dismisses that possibility: “Alack, good man, what should he do more than he hath done? / I dare say no father hath better taught his sonne” (I.ii). Both men readily admit that Isaac is “godly” and “A chosen man of God,” putting to rest the notion that Isaac’s actions have led to his ultimate blindness or Esau’s dissolute lifestyle (I.ii). Rather, Isaac is described as a righteous man of God by his neighbors, who directly reject the possibility that any of Isaac’s actions might have caused his poor fortune (in not only blindness, but in Esau’s roughness). It follows then that the play does not allow for a reading where Isaac’s blindness can be attributed to individual sinfulness. This is in stark contrast with Samson’s admitted culpability and his consequent blindness in *Samson Agonistes*, which parallels medieval perception of disabilities as a direct manifestation or consequence of sin. Whereas Isaac’s condition of blindness is described as a mystery of God’s omnipotent will that came about independent of Isaac’s own actions, Samson’s blindness has come about because of his poor actions and boundless
free will. Isaac’s blindness is viewed in more general terms as an unquestionable circumstance of God’s will.\textsuperscript{30}

While Samson recognizes his own faults in bringing about his own imprisonment and blindness, he still experiences understandable grief over both his blindness and servitude. The text of \textit{Samson Agonistes} includes heart-wrenching descriptions of Samson’s blindness that gesture toward the subjective experience of its author. Samson inevitably refers to his blindness as a consequence of Samson’s own foolish choices; however, throughout the narrative, Samson is also forthright in expressing his grief at experiencing blindness. It may not be a cause of weakness, but it is still a loss. Samson bewails his condition to the utmost degree, and repeatedly does so for the first part of the narrative, describing his blindness as a miserable cause for hopelessness (“O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon, / Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse / Without all hope of day!”), a state of banishment (“exil’d from light’ / As in the land of darkness yet in light”), cause for public scorn (“expos’d / To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong” / Within doors, or without, still as a fool, / In power of others, never in my own”), and a death in life (“Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half…To live a life half dead, a living death, / And buried; but O yet more miserable!”) (76-101). Samson’s bewailing of his blindness extends far beyond the one brief line that Isaac voices in \textit{The Historie of Jacob and Esau}, which aligns with the personal anguish that Milton must have felt as he gradually lost his sight.\textsuperscript{31} Isaac cannot be said to elevate his condition of blindness; however, he does

\textsuperscript{30} However, Isaac’s understanding of God’s will over his blindness does not completely remove the grief he has because of it. In the end, however, Isaac testifies: “whatsoever God doth is all right” (Liv). Isaac and Rebecca then share a moment of solidarity as Isaac begins a statement, “But what the Lord doth send or work by his high will——” that his wife finishes with, “Cannot but be the best, no such thing can be ill” (Liv.). In this brief exchange, Isaac is given just a moment to express “No small grief” at his state of blindness. However, that moment passes quickly, and Isaac then expresses his own ready state of acceptance at God’s predestined will.

\textsuperscript{31} The anonymity of \textit{The Historie of Jacob and Esau} renders it impossible to definitively argue that whereas one play reflects the blind condition of its playwright, the other is simply speculation by an unimpaired playwright.
come to accept his blindness as a matter of omnipotent divine election though it is “No small
grief” to him to experience it:32

Isaac: All bodily punishment or infirmity,
With all maims of nature, whatever they be
Yea, and all other afflictions temporal:
As loss, persecution, or troubles mortal,
Are nothing but a trial or probation.
And what is he that firmly trusteth in the Lord,
OR steadfastly believeth his promise and word,
And knoweth him to be the God omnipotent,
That feedeth and governeth all that he hath sent:
Protecting his faithful in every degree,
And them to relieve in all their necessity?
What creature (I say) that doth this understand,
Will not take all thing in good part at God
's hand?
Shall we at God's hand receive prosperity,
And not be content likewise with adversity?
We ought to be thankful whatever God doth send,
And ourselves wholly to his will to commend. (I.iv)

While Isaac pauses briefly to discuss the misery of blindness only to rest in the knowledge of God’s
omniscient will (“Why, then, should not I thank the Lord, if it please him, / That I shall now be

However, it does seem that the extended lamentation expressed by Samson is a direct result of Milton’s own
condition and arguably reflects Milton’s own genuine grief at his blindness.

32 I have strategically used the term “election” here because of the Biblical context of the narrative as well as
the play’s clear Calvinistic arguments regarding Predestination. The story of Jacob and Esau has popularly
been used to discuss the religious issue of free will and Predestination, but this particular play leaves no rock
unturned in its firm reiteration of Calvinist principles: “But before Jacob and Esau yet born were, / Or had
either done good, or ill perpetrate: / As the prophet Malachi and Paul witness bear, / Jacob was chosen, and
Esau reprobate: / Jacob I love (saith God) and Esau I hate. / For it is not (saith Paul) in man’s renewing or
will, / But in God’s mercy, who chooseth whom he will” (“Prologue of the Play”). Later, Isaac willingly
accepts the fact that he has been deceived by his wife and Jacob to cheat Esau out of his blessing and
inheritance, accounting the same to God’s predestined will:

Isaac: O Lord my God, how deep and unsearchable
Are all thy judgments, and how immutable?
Of thy justice, whom it pleaseth thee, thou dost reject;
Of thy mercy, whom [it] pleaseth thee, thou dost elect.
In my two sons, O Lord, thou hast wrought thy will,
And as thy pleasure hath wrought, so shall it stand still.
Since thou hast set Jacob in Esau his place,
I commit him to the governance of thy grace. (V.iv)
blind, and my sight wax all dim?”), Samson’s character pauses briefly to consider God’s will only to then wallow in the overwhelming misery of his blindness. The contrast in focused attention by these two characters seems to suggest an intimate personal experience in Milton that is lacking in the playwright of *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*.

Samson’s recollection of his fall from proverbial grace because of his captive love for Dalila aligns strongly with the sentiments Hakewill expresses regarding eyesight as a gateway to temptation:

> if we proceed yet one step farther in ripping up, & searching out the abuse of the eie, we shall easily discover it to be an immediate in strumpet, not only of wantoness, but of gluttony, covetousnesse, theft, idolatry, jealousie, pride, contempt, curiosity, envy, witchcraft, & in manner of the whole rebellion, & apostasie, as well of the body, as the minde. (Hakewill 10-11)

In *The Vanitie of the Eye*, Hakewill prescribes eyesight as the primary sense that can lead individuals to temptation and sin. Similarly, Samson describes his own fall as a direct result of trusting a deceitful woman – “Fool, [I] have divulg’d the secret gift of God / To a deceitful Woman” (201-202) – but his plummet begins by seeing: “The first I saw at Timna, and she pleas’d / Me” (219-220). The Biblical account details that after he separates from this first wife, the sight of beautiful women continues to tempt him: “Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and went in unto her” (Judges 16:1). Although Delilah’s appearance is given no description in the Biblical narrative, Dalila’s beauty is emphasized as a particular trap for Samson in Milton’s retelling. The beauty of

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33 Even as the blind and blinded themselves bewail their impaired condition, *Samson Agonistes* also indicates a measure of sorrow and pity derived from characters surrounding the blinded. However, it must be noted that Samson has been forcefully blinded and that the characters who respond with sympathy and kindness are members of his household, whether through blood or social position. Manoa’s response to Samson’s blindness – “O miserable change!” – is a father’s expected reaction of grief at his son’s suffering and fallen state (340).

34 It should be noted that Samson also asserts that though he is tempted visually by the beauty of this “daughter of an Infidel,” he ultimately “urg’d / The Marriage on” so that it would “occasion…Israel’s Deliverance” (221-25).

35 In contrast with the Old Testament narrative, Milton’s Dalila is described as Samson’s lawful wife and not a “harlot.”
Dalila snares Samson for “beauty, though injurious, hath strange power...nor can be easily / Repuls't” (1003-1006), and because of this, Samson equates his fascination with Dalila as a condition of “slavery” worse than his present state as a chained slave of the Philistines:

    The base degree to which I now am fall’n,
    These rags, this grinding, is not yet so base
    As was my former servitude, ignoble,
    Unmanly, ignominious, infamous,
    True slavery, and that blindness worse then this,
    That saw not how degeneratly I serv’d. (414-19)

This theme is repeatedly brought up in *Samson Agonistes* as the dialogue prompts the question, “How are the senses [and in this case, particularly sight], like the play’s political spies, capable of perverting and distorting truth?” (Harvey 652). The early modern belief that sight – and more particularly illumination – was associated with knowledge, learning, and the recognition of truth is also discussed in Amrita Dahr’s study of Milton and the language of blindness in his translation of the Psalms: “If until the seventeenth century light and sight had been considered important, they now possessed an exclusive potential. The lightless were, in a demonstrable sense, outside the realm of intellectual development. Science [now] provided sanction for the firmly established religious idea of light as imperative for the visionary” (84). Perhaps in rejection of this, Milton has Samson pointedly elevate his condition of literal blindness above the experience of being misled, even venturing so far as to claim that he sees better now blinded than he did sighted. In his dialogue with the Harapha of Gath, Samson also contradicts Harapha’s pronouncement that seeing Samson in the flesh will be tantamount to judging his value: “[I] now am come to see of whom such noise / Hath walk’d about, and each limb to survey, / If thy appearance answer loud report” (1088-90). Denying the elevation of the sense of sight over actual experience, Samson’s words cleverly play on sensory sensation to describe experience: “The way to know were not to see but taste” (1091).
The narrative of Samson infers that in his sightedness, Samson was blind; however, having been blinded, Samson can now recognize the truth for what it is. Thus, Samson comes to a place in the drama where he sees his condition of blindness as a more spiritually suitable (if not more desirable) place brought about by his own mistakes. When Dalila pleads with Samson to return with her, Samson speaks of his recognition of her deceitfulness and his newfound ability to resist her “ginns, and toyls”: “Thy fair enchanted cup, and warbling charms / No more on me have power, their force is null’d, / So much of Adders wisdom I have learn’t / To fence my ear against they sorceries” (934-937). Again aligned with Hakewill’s reasoning, “when the eie of the outward sense, growes dull, & dim, the intellectuall eie of reason, and the spirituall eie of faith, grow more fresh, and cleare” (131), Milton implies in *Samson Agonistes* that Samson’s vision of Dalila’s true nature (as he sees it) is all the more clear. Here too, Milton’s own confidence in the guidance of the Holy Spirit in revealing truths that sighted men cannot see also seems to come into play. In more than enhanced spiritual acuity in physical blindness, the text of *Samson Agonistes* also presents an elevation of other sensory perception. As Elizabeth D. Harvey argues in “*Samson Agonistes* and Milton’s Ethics,” Samson’s interaction with the physical world heavily relies on the senses of smell, hearing, and touch: “Samson’s phenomenological experience of his physicality is revealed through the play’s fascination with the senses, its use of sensory language, and its depiction of the passion” (651). The reparation of heightened physical and spiritual senses, in compensation for lost sight, is perhaps the most beneficial effect of sensory debility inferred in Milton’s work, and it speaks to Milton’s own experience of blindness while accomplishing his own political ends as a defender of the Commonwealth.

In his various works, Milton affirms that blindness can in fact create in him a greater capacity to recognize spiritual illumination and to impart that illumination to his able-bodied peers,
who are metaphorically blind to such divine truths. Rather than openly accepting the metaphorical usage of blindness as symbolic for ignorance or spiritual want, Milton explicitly dissociates physical blindness with spiritual blindness. In his *Defensio Secunda*, for instance, Milton asserts:

Finally, as to my blindness, I would rather have mine…*Your blind-ness*, deeply implanted in the inmost faculties, obscures the mind, so that you may see nothing whole or real. Mine, which you make a reproach, merely deprives things of color and superficial appearance. What is true and essential in them is not lost to my intellectual vision…Nor do I feel pain at being classed with the blind, the afflicted, the suffering, and the weak (although you hold this to be wretched), since there is hope that in this way I may approach more closely the mercy and protection of the Father Almighty. There is a certain road which leads through weakness, as the apostle teaches, to the greatest strength. May I be entirely helpless, provided that in my weakness there may arise all the more powerfully this immortal and more perfect strength; provided that in my shadows the light of the divine countenance may shine forth all the more clearly. For then I shall be at once the weakest and the strongest, at the same time blind and most keen in vision. By this infirmity may I be perfected, by this completed. So in this darkness, may I be clothed in light. (emphasis mine, qtd. in Dahr 99-100)

For Milton, who explores the concept of outward and inward light in the Invocation to Book III of *Paradise Lost*, inward illumination is a far greater gift than physical sight. Before expressing his plea for the continued gift of inward light in Book III, Milton’s speaker describes a physical inability to see the light of the sun (as a corresponding symbol for the light of God): “I revisit safe, / And feel thy Sovran vital Lamp; but thou / Revisist’st not these eyes, that rowle in vain / To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn” (III.21-24). He finds solace in his comparison first to two blind artists, the “other two equal’d with me in Fate…were I equal’d with them in renown, / Blind Thamyris and blind Mæonides” before then comparing himself in prophetic capacity to “Tiresias and Phineus Prophets old” (III.35). Milton thus invokes the Classical interpretation as blindness presaging supernatural sight, which for Milton – as a sometime theological apologist – is an extreme asset.  

Milton ends the invocation to Book III with the prayer:

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36 In his own study of John Milton’s works in relation to his blindness, William John Silverman Jr. confirms the association of blindness to almost supernatural inspiration and even prophetic insight: “Milton’s idea of the classical model of blindness is as accurate as he could have known or understood in the seventeenth century. Though many blind beggars lined the streets of ancient Athens…and some disabled were treated
So much the rather thou Celestial light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight. (III.51-55)

Drawing from this prophetic interpretation of blindness, Milton is able to claim unique “insight or divine inspiration he believed God gave him ‘to justify the ways of God to men…[and] ‘to see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight’ as compensation for his blindness” (Paradise Lost I.26 III.54-55 qtd. in Silverman Jr. 8). Milton suggests in the Invocation that he can be a better judge of God’s will in his physical blindness than other men could be with their sight. Samson’s assertion about enlightenment in the midst of blindness is confirmed at the close of the play by the Semichorus: “But he though blind of sight, / Despis’d and thought extinguish’t quite / With inward eyes [was] illuminated” (1687-89).

The same inward illumination that Milton claims in Paradise Lost and his Defensio Secunda is also ascribed to Samson. Milton’s confidence regarding his own Spirit-led sagacity is echoed in Samson’s claims regarding his capacity to recognize deceit more easily in blindness, and the notion is further bolstered by the classical tradition of esteeming blindness as associated with foresight, truth, and inspiration. At the Chorus’ first lamentation over Samson’s blindness, they linger on his physical incapacity to see and then argue in unhappy terms that “inward light alas / Puts forth no visual beam” (162-63). Similarly, in lines 68-72, Samson voices the reality that he is barred from viewing physical light:

Blind among enemies, O worse than chains,
Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!
Light the prime work of God to me is extinct,

with disdain, blindness was also an essential attribute for the poet, and many did not think it possible to be a poet otherwise” (54). Furthermore, it must be noted that the Invocation in Book III has often historically been read autobiographically. See for instance, Franklin R. Baruch’s “Milton’s Blindness: The Conscious and Unconscious Patterns of Autobiograph” or Arnold Sorsby’s “On the Nature of Milton’s Blindness” as two of many examples.
And all her various objects of delight
Annul'd, which might in part my grief have eas'd (68-72)

Though at the beginning of the drama, Samson states he cannot see the light, which one might interpret as Samson being unable to recognize the truth, Samson makes it clear later it is only after he is blind that he becomes wise to Dalila’s manipulation. Similarly to the spiritually “blind” enemies that Milton himself argued against in his *Defensio Secunda*, Samson’s enemies are likewise described as blind. The Philistines’ destruction in *Samson Agonistes* is portrayed as a ruin they have brought upon themselves after being “internal struck” with “blindness” (1686); this spiritual blindness is then directly contrasted with Samson’s own “inward…illumina[ti]on” despite being “blind of sight” (1687-89). Aligning with Hakewill’s argument and giving it more weight through both his narrative characters and his own experiential blindness, Milton validates that blindness can be an asset to the Christian believer, especially in its ability to render blind men better judges of spiritual truths.37

As the narrative of Samson reaches its conclusion in both accounts, readers come across one of the final differences between Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* and Judges 16. In Judges 16:27, the author states that three thousand Philistines, both male and female, who had come to worship Dagon were killed, among which were lords and presumably commoners. In *Samson Agonistes*, however, Manoa specifically recounts that all of the Philistine elite – “Lords, Ladies, Captains, Councellors, or Priests, / Thir choice nobility and flower, not only / Of this [city] but each *Philistian* City round” (1653-55) – had gathered in a massive theatre and were all killed when Samson razes the arena. Scholars such as David Quint and David Norbrook have “perceptively claimed that Samson’s terrible vengeance against his enemies is cognate with Milton’s imaginative resistance to the restored monarchy of Charles II in 1660 and to the religious uniformity it imposed” (Harvey 649). Indeed, Milton’s closet

37 This seems to ring with particular significance in the case of Milton’s rendering of the Israelite Judge, Samson.
drama takes the already large number of Philistine deaths to astronomical heights, rewriting the
death of three thousand Philistines in one mansion to “The desolation of a Hostile City” and
presumably the deaths of all the Philistine elite in the surrounding area (1561). The narrative also
calls into question God’s role in Samson’s final act because Samson’s final prayer from the biblical
account – which reveals that Samson specifically seeks his own death and that the feat only occurred
because God deigned to answer Samson’s plea for returned strength – is not voiced in Samson
Agonistes. Markedly, the Biblical account gives specific voice to Samson’s suicidal desire and
determination – “Let me die with the Philistines” (Judges 16:30) – and this would not be
incompatible with Old Testament law, for there is no explicit rabbinical prohibition of suicide.
However, in Western Christian tradition, suicide is understood as self-murder. After all, how can
one repent following such a grievous sin if the sin itself results in death? Samson’s self-destructive
will in Judges is conspicuously missing in Milton’s retelling; Samson’s final prayer is left unvoiced,
and his own death is interpreted by the Messenger, Chorus, and Manoa as an unavoidable but not
necessarily sought-after consequence of his revenge. The messenger relays that “Samson with these
[Philistine elite] immixt, inevitably / Pulld down the same destruction on himself” (1657-58), and the
Chorus reiterates explicitly that Samson “self-kill’d” himself but “Not willingly, but tangl’d in the fold
/ Of dire necessity” (emphasis mine, 1664-66). Whether or not Samson desired his own death in
Samson Agonistes is a technical mystery, despite the forceful interpretations of both the Messenger
and the Chorus that will not allow for any explanation other than “accident.” The ambiguity of
Samson’s statement before his final exit permits multiple interpretations:

I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts…
If there be aught of presage in the mind,
This day will be remarkable in my life
By some great act, or of my days the last. (emphasis mine, 1381-89)
One could argue from this passage that Samson predicts his own death with his final “remarkable” act; however, conversely, one could lean heavily on his “or” as simply a statement of possibility and not intent. The moral ambiguity surrounding Samson’s self-destruction renders the play’s persistent emphasis on individual choice somewhat antithetical. Rather than giving voice to Samson’s final choice – the prayer that the Biblical account demonstrates is a disclosure of the true intent behind Samson’s final action – the Chorus and the Messenger avidly deny Samson the free will he has unequivocally claimed by asserting their own interpretations of his final actions. The epilogue by the Chorus also competes with the lesson on the importance of human choice that Samson sought to impart. True to form, the Chorus presents a Calvinist reading of God’s unavoidable will: those “that band…to resist / His uncontrollable intent” prove ineffectual and are inevitably annihilated.

John Milton’s rendering of the Biblical narrative of Samson in *Samson Agonistes* treats the issue of blindness with a complexity that was largely absent in early modern discourse. Milton’s depiction of blindness becomes a means by which he explores his own interpretation of free will working within the popular paradigm of omnipotent divine will. As much as Milton seems to represent a Protestant outlook on absolute freedom of choice in *Samson Agonistes*, ascribing Samson’s blindness to this freedom, the play also supports the concepts of individual culpability and unavoidable divine will. After all, it is Samson’s poor choices that bring about his blindness, but in the end, Samson’s blindness is what becomes the avenue by which he takes the Philistines by surprise and destroys them. Although John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* aligns with reformed theology in his depiction of free will, his explanation for the cause of blindness in *Samson Agonistes* does not conform to the Protestant religious model of disabilities. Samson defends his own individual culpability; in this way, the play does not emphasize a state of universal fallenness as the cause for his blindness. Also deviating from the early modern pejorative stigmas of sensory debility, Milton
both defends and champions blindness in *Samson Agonistes* and various other works as both proof of righteous political activism and as proof of spiritual insight. In representing blindness (and the causes of it) in all its complexity, Milton rejects the oversimplified religious explanations that his predecessors and contemporaries often ascribed to the condition. Milton “particularizes his form of blindness,” as Duran notes, “resist[ing] any potential devaluation or ‘stigma-tization’ ascribed to those with other clearly expressed forms of physical blindness” (149). The motivation behind his contra-Reformation religious outlook most likely lies in Milton’s own experiential blindness, which he “characterizes,” according to Duran, as “but one of many forms of the limited human condition” (155). This “limit[ation]” as Duran describes it, however, is not a limitation for Milton as much as a badge of honor because it was evidence to him of tireless efforts in support of the Parliamentary cause. Because blindness for Milton was associated with a feeling of pride and accomplishment, his Samson champions blindness by emphasizing the power of his own elective choices.

In a more secular vein though certainly alluding to religious matters, Jonathan Swift’s poem “On His Own Deafness,” and the repetition of this initial poem in the dialogue in “The Dean’s Complaint” aligns with the position of Isaac and Rebecca in that the work also advocates against preoccupied grief over sensory impairment through the satirizing of self-pity.\(^{38}\) The published version of the poem “On His Own Deafness,” records simply the Doctor’s statements in the later dialogue of “The Dean’s Complaint.” This poem produces an overarching tone of desolation because the focus is entirely on what the “Doctor” has lost with his deteriorating hearing rather than

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\(^{38}\) This example is of similar significance in a discussion of personal experience of sensory impairment because Swift is known for having suffered from loss of hearing: “Swift was often tormented by ‘a hundred oceans roaring in my ears.’ He became progressively deaf as well, first in one ear and later in both. The dizziness affected his balance, and he referred to it variously as ‘tottering’ and ‘vertigo’” (Damrosch 67). In addition to going deaf in his later age – Swift recorded “Now deaf 1740” (qtd. in Damrosch 315) – he also suffered from loss of sight as he aged.
being leavened with the interlocutor’s advice.39 In the earlier 1734 draft of “On His Own Deafness,” “begged from Swift in September” from his housekeeper Mrs. Ridgeway (Mayhew 87), there are several variants in the poem that indicate how the process of revising it may have been a lesson in optimism for Swift:

September 1734 unpublished draft
Deaf, giddy, odious to my friends
Now all my Consolation ends
No more I hear my Church’s bell
Than if it rang out for my Knell…
Nay though I know you would not credit—
Although a thousand times I said it,
A Scold whom you might hear a mile hence
No more could reach me than her silence.

November 1734 published draft
Deaf, giddy, helpless, left alone
To all my Friends a Burthen grown:
No more I hear my Church’s Bell
Than if it rang out for my Knell:
At Thunder now no more I start,
Than at the Rumbling of a Cart:
Nay, what’s incredible, alack!
I hardly hear a Woman’s Clack.

In the lines of the September 1734 draft above, I have italicized the variants in the original poem to be compared with the published draft from November of the same year. It is clear from the unpublished first draft of the work that Swift was in a darker frame of mind related to his impairment because he does not simply describe his impairment as a “Burthen” to his friends but rather as something which inspires loathing, something “odious.” Swift’s self-deprecation of his ever-deteriorating hearing and his apparent depression caused by the impairment lessens somewhat in the later draft with the removal of the September 1734 line “Now all my Consolation ends.” In this earlier frame of mind, Swift enunciates in the poem that his deafness has bereft him of all

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39 Suffering from the age of 23 from what has been diagnosed as Meniere’s disease, Jonathan Swift’s deafness was marked by a gradual loss of hearing (rather than a sudden onset), accompanied by persistent vertigo and nausea (Bloom 2). In his various correspondence, Swift mentioned his complaints caused by the disease as well as his worsening deafness, first in his left ear and then in his right: “I have been now ill about a month, but the family are so kind as to speak loud enough for me to hear them; and my deafness is not so extreme as you have known when I have fretted at your mannerly voice” (“To the Same,” Market Hill, January 13, 1728-9). In his March 6, 1728-9 letter to Alexander Pope, Swift records, “I passed eight months in the country, with sir Arthur and my lady Acheson, and had at least half a dozen returns of my giddiness and deafness, which lasted me about three weeks apiece; and, among other inconveniences, hindered me from visiting my chapter…This disorder neither hinders my sleeping nor much my walking; yet is the most mortifying malady I can suffer” (The Works of the Rev. Jonathan Swift 12).
comfort, leaving him isolated because his friends consider him “odious.” In his later draft, Swift strikes from the page, and perhaps from his own mind, the hopeless outlook that his life has become one lacking “all…Consolation.” Even if incrementally, Swift’s voice in the first draft of the poem to its published reiteration becomes less despairing, and by the time he pens “The Dean’s Complaint,” which blatantly utilizes “On His Own Deafness,” Swift ultimately satirizes and consequently rejects his earlier self-deprecation and despair.

In “The Dean’s Complaint,” Swift gives voice to his interior monologue from “On His Own Deafness,” turns it into a dialogue, and ultimately rejects the spontaneous response of defeatism towards the matter of his deafness:

DOCTOR.  Deaf, giddy, helpless, left alone.
ANSWER.  Except the first, the fault's your own.
DOCTOR.  To all my friends a burden grown.
ANSWER.  Because to few you will be shewn.
        Give them good wine, and meat to stuff,
        You may have company enough.
DOCTOR.  No more I hear my church's bell,
        Than if it rang out for my knell.
ANSWER.  Then write and read, 'twill do as well. (1-9)

Rather than fixating on what has been lost (as he does in “On His Own Deafness”), Swift emphasizes in “The Dean’s Complaint” what the Doctor (himself) is still fully capable of doing. In this way, the “Answer” provided by his interlocutor highlights the residual agency of the impaired Doctor, claiming that the only thing preventing him from still living a life full of enjoyment is the Doctor himself. As the Answer blatantly states, the isolation that the Doctor claims to experience is self-imposed “Because to few [he] will be shewn” (4). The Answer to the Doctor pinpoints the “fault” in the Doctor’s loneliness as his “own,” for his own self-imposed isolation prevents him from continued friendship, learning, or communication. However, the remedy is simple: according to the Answer, the Doctor’s seclusion would be easily resolved if he reached out to companions in
friendship and showered them with generosity. “Give them good wine, and meat to stuff, / You may have company enough,” the interlocutor advises (5-6). Though of course the understood message in this retort is that most people willingly accept hospitality, no matter the extenuating circumstances, the more positive interpretation is that the Doctor’s friends would not care if their friend had gone deaf so long as they could still socialize with him.

Beyond addressing the problem of isolation through acquired deafness, the Doctor expresses his grief that he is unable to experience the edification of the church. When the Doctor complains that his deafness prevents him from learning more about his religion in the Church – he cannot hear the “church’s bell” and thus cannot hear the words of the clergy on spiritual matters – the Answer is profound: “Then write and read, ‘twill do as well” (8-9). Here, the dialogue in the work provocatively suggests the capability of self-education – and more importantly, religious self-education – in the sensorily disabled. Although Swift does not make the distinction between individuals born congenitally deaf and individuals who become deaf, his assertion still stands in opposition with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century statements about the deaf and their inability to acquire education or experience religion, which are voiced definitively in Hakewill’s *The Vanitie of the Eye*:

Whence it is that we have heard of many blinde men who have become famous for wisdom & learning; but of deafe men we have not heard of any: for which cause (as I suppose) in our common law such as are borne deafe, though they see perfectly well, yet are they ranked among mad men, lunaticke persons, and children, whome (as Bracton affirmeth) in cases of felony, their very want of common reason and understanding priviledgeth from the ordinary punishment inflicted by lawe: but for such as are borne blind I finde no such priviledge the law supposing them to be as capable of reason as others, & not only capable to conceive reason but to expresse it as well by speech as writing, which in men borne deafe is not only unusual, but (in mine understanding) impossible. Wherupon in the civill law, though they be indeed excluded from intercession or postulation as they call it, (though upon a blind reason in my judgement) yet are they not forbidden to supply the places of judges, or magistrates, it being not the blindnesse of the body, but of the minde, which taketh away the faculty of judging. (102-103)
Opposing the assumption that the deaf are incapable of general or religious tutelage, Swift’s “Answer” advocates strongly for the Doctor to study and write about religion; since he cannot learn from others through speech, he can become his own teacher. In true Protestant vein, “The Dean’s Complaint” places religion in the hands of the people rather than demanding its sole dispensation through the interpretation of the priesthood. Finally, the poet introduces humor to alleviate the condition that had caused the Doctor to begin the poem with grief:

**DOCTOR.**

At thunder now no more I start,

Than at the rumbling of a cart.

**ANSWER.**

Think then of thunder when you [fart].

**DOCTOR.**

Nay, what's incredible, alack!

No more I hear a woman's clack.

**ANSWER.**

A woman's clack, if I have skill,

Sounds somewhat like a throwster's mill;

But louder than a bell, or thunder:

That does, I own, increase my wonder. (10-18)

Though the entirety of Swift’s work seems somewhat banal and perhaps somewhat crass, the implications of the work carry tangible lessons for those experiencing sensory disability. While the Doctor initially seeks to dwell on his incapacity and deficiency, the Answer – presumably from Swift’s subconscious mind – rebukes such a line of discourse. Similarly in *Samson Agonistes*, though the initial response from Samson, the Chorus, and Manoa is lingering lamentation, Samson ultimately rejects this dirge. In life, Swift practiced what he preached in his poetry, for in a letter addressed to the Countess of Suffolk, dated 19 August, 1727, Swift declared, “So much for the calamities wherein I have the honour to resemble you: and you see your sufferings are but children in comparison of mine; and yet, to shew my philosophy, I have been as cheerful as Scarron” (qtd. in Amos 82). Indeed, the personified subconscious resorts instead to gaiety, challenging the Doctor to focus on his agency in matters of friendship and religion as well as prompting him to recognize the hilarity that can still be experienced in life.
Conclusion

Although prevailing demoralizing attitudes toward sensory debility in the sixteenth century were expressed in popular works both on the stage and on the page, in several humanistic writings of the seventeenth century, an alternative reaction and an appropriately complex description of sensory disability was being fostered. This chapter has emphasized the “key counterdiscourses … with keen sensibility toward non-normative embodiment” that multiple early modern poets and prose writers propounded (Hobgood and Wood 40). The metamorphosing portrayals of the sensorily disabled, seen in the previously discussed works of Thomas Traherne, George Hakewill, John Milton, and Jonathan Swift substantiate the characterization of the religious model of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as dynamic and diverse, rather than static and uniform.

Rather than describing sensory deprivation in depreciatory terms, seventeenth-century poetry and prose began to offer radical counterarguments that bristled against sixteenth-century uniformity in their expressed desire for sensory impairment, their explorations of the religious benefits of debility, the rejection of the interpretation of sensory disability as divine punishment or mandate, and the affirmation of residual agency in the sensorily disabled. The diversification of religious belief in the seventeenth century, which impacted societal perceptions of disability and introduced enabling narratives of the impaired, ultimately culminated in an undeniably concrete way: in the seventeenth-century instruction of the deaf. The advent of Deaf education in the mid-1600s serves as proof of a final shift in the early modern ideological framework for disabilities. While prior chapters examined popular literature and performances that treated impairment as a spectacle and reiterated the established reformed position, the poetry and prose of this chapter has highlighted works that encourage the humanizing of impairment as well as depict a countercultural contemplation of debility as a potential spiritual benefit. What these works suggest by their
heterodox depictions of sensory impairment is that there was a subsection of early modern society that “imagine[d] an alternative understanding of early modern bodies and minds that both welcome[d] and need[ed] disability” (Hobgood and Wood 40) and – roughly three hundred years before sustained academic dialogue in disability studies was first raised – began to explore the compassionate, bioethical themes that have become the foundation of contemporary disability studies.
CHAPTER FIVE

RECOVERING HUMANITY: INSTRUCTING THE SENSORILY-IMPAIRED

For Deafenesse and Dumbenesse being privations and Negatives, wee can easier say what you cannot doe, then what you can: For, that is beyond our reach, positively to state your abilities, which may be ranked with honour, praise, and glory

-- John Bulwer

Introduction

Although every chapter thus far has addressed both deafness and blindness, when it comes to early modern education, only one of these impairments was believed to utterly remove one’s capacity for learning and even typical intelligence. Early modern Englishmen considered the congenital blind still capable of attaining education with moderate effort as well as capable of great wisdom, whereas most believed educating the congenital deaf was a near impossibility. In this 1680 juxtaposition, George Dalgarno expresses the difficulty of educating the deaf in contrast to the relative ease with which the blind begin their educations:

1. The blind man goes to School in his cradle; this so early care is not taken of the Deaf. 2. The blind man is still learning from all that are about him; For every body he converses with is a Tutor, and every word he hears, is a lecture to him; by which he either learns what he knew not, or confirms what he had. The Deaf man not being capable of this way of discipline, has no teacher at all: and tho necessity may put him upon contriving, & using a few signs; yet those have no affinity to the Language by which they that are about him do converse amongst themselves, and therefore [signs] are of little use to him. 3. The Blind man goes thro the discipline of Language in the best of his time, Childhood, and under the best of Teachers, women and children: The Deaf man is deprived of both these opportunities. 4. The blind man learns his Language by the by, and aliud agens; the Deaf cannot attain a language without instruction, and the expence of much time and pains. 5. The deaf man is confined to the circumstances of light, distance, posture of body, both in himself, and him he communicates with: the blind man is free from these streightening circumstances.

(Didascalocophus or The deaf and dumb mans tutor 300)
Educating the deaf, which Dalgarno believes can be done albeit with “much time and pains,” had been considered an impossibility in England prior to the mid-seventeenth century. As Hakewill expressed in *The Vanitie of the EYE*, “in our common law such as are borne deafe, though they see perfectly well, yet are they ranked among mad men, lunaticke persons, and children” (102). An astonishing couplet, often attributed in translation to Lucretius in his *De Rerum Natura*, encapsulates the historical opinion of the deaf up to the early modern era: “To instruct the deaf, no art could ever reach, / No care improve, and no wisdom teach” (qtd. in Scouten 7). However, as this final chapter will detail, the religious sectarianism of the seventeenth century, which allowed for a multiplicity of religious belief, also began to transform what had been a more uniform sixteenth-century religious model for disability. By the mid-seventeenth century, early modern natural philosophers and teachers of the deaf in England began to refute the assumption that the deaf were uneducable by referencing circulated accounts of successful education for the deaf in Spain and proving the opposite in their own successful efforts educating the hearing impaired.

The texts in Chapter Four demonstrated a multiplicity of religious belief allowing for heterodox interpretations of disability where once stood religious uniformity. The trajectory of the turn explored in Chapter Four culminates in this fifth and final chapter, which argues that the phenomenon of instructing the deaf should be interpreted as a tangible shift in the early modern ideology of impairment. In this chapter, I survey the theoreticians and practitioners of the education of the deaf, beginning in sixteenth-century Spain, eventually spreading through the continent.

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1 According to the *American Annals of the Deaf, Volumes 56-57*, this quote is misattributed to Lucretius (213-214). The original passage, found in Book V of *De Rerum Natura* is as follows: “Nec ratione docere ulla suadereque surdis, / quid sit opus factu, facilest: neque enim paterentur, / nec ratione ulla sibi ferrent amplius auris / vocis inauditos sonitus obtundere frustra” (1052-1055). Translated more literally, the lines read, “nor is it easy to teach in any way or to persuade what is necessary to be done when men are deaf; for they would not have suffered or endured in any way that he should go on dinning into their ears sounds of the voice which they had never heard, all to no purpose” (trans. by W. H. D. Rouse 461). In the “Miscellaneous” notes in Volumes 56-57 of the *American Annals of the Deaf*, the editors claim that the context of the passage renders the word “*surdis*” as those who are ignorant and unwilling to listen, and does not mean the physically deaf (214).
(markedly in France and the Low Countries), and finally to England in the mid- to late-seventeenth century. The phenomenological, philosophical, and methodological works of early modern theoreticians and practitioners, such as Pedro Ponce de León, Don Manuel Ramírez de Carrión, Juan Pablo Bonet, John Bulwer, William Holder, John Wallis, Anton Deusing, and George Dalgarno broke the ground for Deaf pedagogy as we recognize it today. The successful undertaking of the Spanish Benedictine progenitors of systematic deaf education achieved global recognition as continental travelers such as Kenelm Digby witnessed known deaf-mutes speaking and brought back stories of deaf individuals who could prove successful speech education.\(^2\) The novel spectacle of witnessing the deaf mimic the utterances of their audience through lip-reading (in multiple languages) contributed tremendously to the spread of deaf education, particularly in seventeenth-century England, where the zealous exploration of natural philosophy and the development of phonetic theory aided the growing field of education for the deaf.

The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century explosion of interest in the education of the deaf may have been the means by which the prior medieval emphasis on charitable sympathy toward the disabled poor was redirected away from almsgiving and toward an impulse to educate the deaf and improve their quality of life. Almsgiving had been a common practice for members of the medieval church, but the compulsion for individuals to give charitably was quelled after the Reformation not only through the forced taxation of the English Poor Laws but also through the dramatic and literary reinforcement of the belief that disabled beggars were most likely feigning their impairments to garner alms. Although certainly English education of the deaf seemed to be driven in large part by

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\(^2\) Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-1665) was an English explorer, diplomat, and natural philosopher. He was one of the original members of the Royal Society and was “distinguished for his philosophical and scientific writings” \(^{(A\ Cambridge\ Alumni\ Database)}\). Digby voluntarily retreated to France because of his Catholic faith from 1643-54, and it was during this exile that he published an account of Don Luis’ spoken performance which he had observed in person twenty years prior \((Lane\ 88)\). His book was titled \textit{Two Treatises: In the one of which, The Nature of Bodies; In the other, The Nature of Man’s Soul} (1644).
philosophical curiosity and phonetic exploration, theoreticians such as John Bulwer recognized societal disadvantages that impaired individuals (and specifically deaf persons) faced due to their impairments. These philosophers and educators then used their sympathetic response to these injustices as the impulse behind their theories of deaf education.

In addition to this redirection of charitable responses, the progression of deaf education relates to the pathological mindset underlying the perception of the disabled body as an opportunistic site for miraculous cure. The “curative” attitude that stimulated the pursuit of miraculous cure for the impaired in medieval society also influenced the seventeenth-century English interest in educating the deaf. Almost universally, the practice of educating the deaf hinged upon an “oralist” mentality. David Cram and Jaap Maat describe the oralist approach as one where instructors believe “the deaf should be forced to adopt artificial speech in imitation of the linguistic practices of the hearing, and the use of sign language should be suppressed” (Teaching Language 24). The predominant “oralist” methodology can be interpreted as an approach to deaf education dependent upon a prescriptive mentality – i.e., the attempt to “fix” what was seen as an unnatural anomaly – which corresponds to a now-recognizable model in disability studies: the medical

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3 Borrowing the term “linguistic colonialism” from Stephen Greenblatt’s study of Caliban’s enforced acquisition of supposed Italian in The Tempest, Jennifer L. Nelson and Bradley S. Berens argue that early modern deaf educators committed the same atrocity. According to their article “Spoken Daggers, Deaf Ears, and Silent Mouths,” those that teach from the “oralist” perspective prioritize English in order to achieve their ultimate goal of having deaf individuals communicate in an unfamiliar language via lip-reading and parroting of speech through the study of verbal pronunciation. They argue that in this sense there was a colonization of the deaf occurring in England as much as there was colonization of “savages” in other parts of the world: “the deaf are still seen as lacking a defining human trait, and are excluded from society and from full recognition as people with a language of their own – sign language” (Nelson and Berens 66).

4 Here and throughout this chapter I refer to Teaching Language to a Boy Born Deaf when referencing biographical, contextual, and historical notes about early modern theorists who undertook the education of the deaf. The introduction to Teaching Language was written to “[sketch] the background” to the work of John Wallis and one of the first transcribed copies of Alexander Popham’s notebook (viii). The text itself is historical and outlines, “in a necessarily summary way, the philosophical, medical, juridical, and theological frameworks from within which deafness and deaf education were approached in the Western world” (viii).
approach. According to Mitchell and Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis*, the medical approach to disability in the early modern era is best described as a “‘cure or kill’ phenomenon: that ‘disability must be either rehabilitated or expunged’ and that this perspective ‘medicalizes disability…[in] an essentialist discourse that treats variation as pathology’” (qtd. in *Recovering Disability* 13). Nonetheless, in order for congenitally deaf individuals to qualify for legal and religious rights previously denied them — such as the right to titles, an inheritance, the writing of wills, and ultimately to be recipients of salvation — the acquisition of English in both writing and speech with the suppression of natural signing was a necessary evil.  

The “curative” impulse recognized today as the medical model of disability manifested in the Middle Ages as a pursuit of miraculous cure, where impaired individuals would seek supernatural healing for physical or sensory debilities by taking pilgrimages to visit holy relics or acclaimed healers. However, with the renunciation of miraculous cure in post-Reformation England, deaf individuals were encouraged instead to seek out the “cure” of language acquisition, manifest in their ability to parrot speech, lip-read, write, and read English. Speech instruction certainly could not cure a person’s deafness — although natural philosophers such as William Holder did attempt experiments to restore hearing in deaf children — however, the ability to lip-read and utter language served to “cure” the problems caused by language barriers. Kenelm Digby even writes of the performance he

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5 The privation of these rights occurred with individuals born deaf (and necessarily mute) and not to adults who had lost hearing due to age or sickness. I use the phrasing “necessary evil” in light of a modern response, where an oralist suppression of sign language would translate as a suppression of Deaf Culture through the denial of language acquisition.

6 Having undertaken a series of observations which he leaves unmentioned in his section titled “An Experiment concerning Deafness,” Holder records his conclusion that Alexander Popham’s deafness was caused by a lack of tension in his tympanum (“An Appendix Concerning Persons Deaf and Dumb” 221). Holder’s outlandish experiments to increase said tension included the following: forcing Popham to bite down on “a Lute-string, holding one end thereof in his Teeth” while it was strummed (“An Appendix Concerning Persons Deaf and Dumb” 221) and “beat[ing] a Drum fast and loud by him” while having someone else stand behind Popham and simultaneously call his name (“An Appendix Concerning Persons Deaf and Dumb” 222). Holder claimed the beating of the drum directly beside Popham’s ears increased
saw of a young, deaf, Spanish lord articulately speaking, describing that everyone greeted the spectacle “as if he had wrought a miracle” (*Two Treatises* 254). Finally, rather than prioritizing the salvation of the deaf and teaching them to read, write, and speak English in order to guide them toward that salvation, English educators of the hearing impaired utilized the advancements in the scientific method and the developing theories of phonetics to approach their deaf pupils pathologically, concerning themselves with “curing” muteness through spoken and written English.

Although I will begin this chapter with a description of some of the major figures in the development of deaf education, my primary concern is to delicately weigh the benefits of early modern deaf education against the undeniable detriments that became part and parcel of the conventional practice for teaching the deaf. Although certainly the development of deaf education in the early modern era bears a multitude of benefits in the broader progression of aided education for those with learning, physical, cognitive, or sensory impairments, there were a multitude of problems in the theoretical foundations of early modern deaf education that proved to have damaging consequences in the still persistent sociological perception of the deaf as subnormal. Among these problems, I will address the following interconnected concerns: the degrading spectacle of the speaking deaf, the controversies between early modern deaf theorists and practitioners, the dismissal of natural signing as a legitimate language system, and finally the negative consequences that accompanied the early modern explosion of theories on educating the deaf. However, each detriment also bore its own intrinsic benefit in developing early modern deaf education as well as in granting a legal and religious capacity that had been largely denied the deaf in their absence of tension, giving him the ability to hear his name spoken to him. More likely, however, is the possibility that Popham simply claimed he could hear his name so that Holder’s bizarre, and perhaps injurious, experimentations would end.
literacy and speech. After the early modern era, the developments that occurred were enormously influential in the continuation of developing pedagogy for deaf education.

As previously discussed and demonstrated, disability perception altered noticeably from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century as society began to embrace increasingly heterodox and variable interpretations of disability. The multiplicity of religious belief in the sixteenth and seventeenth century was reflected in shifting depictions of the sensorily impaired in literature and culminated in the mid-seventeenth century advent of pedagogical treatises on instruction of the deaf. The development of deaf instruction functioned in the era as a continuation of the same humanizing tenet for the sensorily impaired witnessed in the poetry and prose of individuals such as Thomas Traherne, John Milton, and George Hakewill. The metamorphosis in disability interpretation – witnessed in the unorthodox descriptions of the deaf and blind in seventeenth-century poetry and prose – at last culminated into a tangible shift in the cultural ideology of the period. The treatises on deafness, phonetics, and education by natural philosophers such as William Holder, John Wallis, John Bulwer, and George Dalgarno represent a clear alteration in cultural ideology because they universally theorize and substantiate that the deaf were cognitive beings capable of instruction. The deaf and blind had been treated in history and literature as symbols, objects of charity or miraculous occurrence, and scapegoats for sin or wrath – and the congenital deaf were furthermore supposed as ineducable and irredeemable. However, in the mid-seventeenth century, impaired individuals began to be portrayed instead as educable, spiritually gifted, and characterized by their linguistic ingenuity.

**The Development of Deaf Education in Spain**

The perceived official origin of education for the deaf in Spain carries its own dramatic intrigue because its history is marked both with originality and profound accomplishment as well as with intellectual theft, corporal punishment, and the exhibition of the speaking deaf before the most
powerful nobility in early modern Europe. The particular brand of “oralist” education, begun in Spain and perpetuated in England, was characterized by a dismissal of natural signing as a legitimate language system and focused particularly on instructing the deaf to acquire the language of the normate population in both writing and speech. The man credited as being the progenitor of systematic deaf education was a Spanish Benedictine monk named Pedro Ponce de León (1510?-1584). Ponce de León was “almost certainly not the first person ever to try and teach deaf people how to use the language of their hearing environment,” as Cram and Maat note (Teaching Language 12). However, in an era when “deafness and muteness were thought to be inextricably linked, Ponce taught his pupils to speak,” and it was for this then unique approach to educating the deaf that Ponce de León became renowned (Plann 2).

In the sixteenth century, there was a particular need for teachers of the deaf because in both the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain, as is noted in The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia, there were “increased numbers of deaf children among the nobility” (“Philosophy and Models of Oralism”). It just so happened that Ponce de León was a naturally ideal candidate to successfully educate the deaf. First, Ponce de León’s location at a Benedictine monastery made him particularly suited to encounter numerous deaf individuals because it was common practice for Spanish nobles

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7 The first recognized and recorded teacher of the deaf, Pedro Ponce de León, seems to have been largely excluded from what became the conventional practices in Spanish deaf education; rather than seeking self-promotion or monetary compensation, Pedro Ponce was largely motivated by religious concern and hoped to teach the deaf in order to make the Catholic faith, and thus salvation, accessible to them. Furthermore, albeit the final outcome Pedro Ponce sought for his students was the ability to independently maneuver the language of the majority, he seemed more open to their use of natural signing and even actively incorporated it into his instruction.

8 What David Cram and Jaap Maat refer to as an “oralist” philosophical model for deaf education, Marilyn Daniels refers to as a “pathological” view (Daniels xiv). In essence, the theory is the same: the deaf are seen as deficient because they cannot read, speak, nor write in the language of the majority. To overcome this deficiency, they are taught the language of the majority while suppressing their own “natural signing.” I will distinguish between the terms “oralist” and “pathological”: I use “oralist” in terms of speech acquisition methodology, and “pathological” in terms of sociological ideology.
to send their impaired sons to monasteries where they could live in relative peace and isolation (Teaching Language 12). It is likely that Ponce de León would have met a number of deaf Spanish nobles before he had the inclination to teach any of them. Second, as a Benedictine monk, Ponce de León and his fellow brothers would most likely have been able to communicate through gesture in their hours of reverent and meditative silence: “A delineation of signs, in use at the Benedictine monastery in Cluny, France, is found in the ‘Constitutions and Rules’ of the monastic order. The Vetus Disciplina Monastica, published in Paris in 1726, contains detailed descriptions of more than four hundred such signs” (Daniels 15). Third, Ponce de León’s life as a monk devoted to his faith seemed to uniquely motivate him to attempt instructing the deaf. According to Marilyn Daniels in her book Benedictine Roots in the Development of Deaf Education, it was Ponce de León’s role as a Benedictine monk that made him especially sympathetic toward those denied the faith due to impediments. He wished to teach the deaf and mute “for the sake of their immortal souls,” and he also aided those wishing to join the monastic orders (Daniels 12).  

What is known of Ponce de León’s methods survives not through his own written works, but rather through the publications and practices of those who observed him and perpetuated his instruction. Ponce de León’s rumored text, which allegedly detailed his strategies for teaching the deaf, was never published. Francisco Valles recorded one such example of Ponce de León’s methods in his 1595 work De iis quae scripta sunt physice in libris sacris, sive de sacra philosophia, liber singularis. The record is as follows:

[that writing can be taught before speaking] has been clearly shown by Peter Ponce, a monk of Saint Benedict, and a friend of mine, who (a wonderful thing) taught persons born deaf to speak, by no other method, than by teaching them first to write, indicating with his finger the things that were signified to them by characters, and next prompting them to make the

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9 In fact, Pedro Ponce de León’s first student was a man named Gaspar de Burgos, who was denied the opportunity to become a monk because of his congenital deafness; Ponce de León was able to teach him “to communicate well enough to be accepted as a postulant [a candidate for a religious order]” (Daniels 12).
Corresponding with Valles’ description of Ponce de León’s pedagogy, Alvaro Marchesi, cited in “Sign Language in the Education of the Deaf in Spain,” states that Ponce’s methods “included dactylology [hand gestures or signing], writing, and speech” and that “The initial communication between Ponce de León and his student was gesture, which evolved into manual signs and the finger alphabet. From all accounts, the teacher evidently next moved to writing and ended with spoken words. The monk saw signs as the quickest way to language and comprehension, considering them a helpful step for his pupils until they could walk alone in the world of speech” (qtd. in Daniels 14-15). Ponce de León’s methods were advertised through word of mouth, and eventually many aristocratic families brought their deaf offspring to Ponce de León, hoping that they might be educated and thus eligible for inheritance.

Less than fifty years after Ponce de León’s death, the wife to the constable of Castile sought a teacher for her deaf son after recalling the successful education which sprung from the Benedictine order, and Don Manuel Ramírez de Carrión (1579-1650) – another Spanish teacher of the deaf “who had learned his techniques from Pedro Ponce[’s]” method of instruction – answered her plea (Daniels 23). Ramírez de Carrión taught Luís Hernández de Velasco (the Marquis of Fresno, known as Don Luís) for four years. Don Luís was the grandson to Don Iñigo, the Duke of Frías, and son to the Condestable of Castile. As Teresa L. Chaves and Jorge L. Soler assert, “It is not known how [Carrión] became interested in teaching the deaf, nor how he acquired this skill” (235). However, Carrión apparently had garnered interest in the occupation at a relatively young age; he had successfully taught a deaf child in his hometown of Hellín as well as several deaf aristocrats, and

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10 It just so happens that the two deaf brothers to Don Iñigo – Don Pedro and Don Francisco – had both been sent to the Monastery of Oña to receive instruction by Fray Pedro Ponce (Chaves and Soler 236).
after his teaching of Don Luís, Carrión continued to profit from this profession. Carrión never published an account of his secret methods, ostensibly because he feared that competitors would appropriate his methods and steal his clientele. Ironically, despite his best efforts, this is exactly what happened. Although not much is known about Carrión’s methods, one unfavorable account by Louis de Rouvroy, the duke of Saint-Simon, suggests that the severe strategies of Ramírez de Carrión’s instruction are perhaps best forgotten rather than modeled:

“The truth is he [Carrión] behaved toward him [Don Luís] like a dog trainer would or like those people who for money display trained animals that surprise you with their skill and obedience and seem to understand and explain by signs all that their master tells them. He used hunger, bastinado [beatings on the soles of the feet with a stick], deprivation of light, and reward commensurate with performance. Such was his success that the boy came to grasp everything from the movements of the lips and a few gestures, to understand everything, to read, write, and even speak, although with considerable difficulty. (Louis de Rouvroy qtd. in Lane 89)

Though Carrión’s original motivation is unclear, his continued practice of teaching the deaf and the high demand in that occupation during his lifetime suggests that his practice was highly profitable – “He was indeed the first one to make a living in this profession” (Chaves and Soler 244). Although Carrión was enigmatic about his methods and did not publish any text detailing them, Carrión’s (and by extension Ponce de León’s) methods were also observed by another man while Carrión was in the employ of this noble Spanish family.

Juan Pablo Bonet (1579-1633) has received worldwide and centuries-long fame for his own instruction of the deaf and the influence it has had over the development of deaf pedagogy. The publication of his book (the first publicized manual for the instruction of the deaf) contributed astronomically to the spread of teaching the deaf to speak. Oddly, Bonet was not a philosopher, phonetician, or even a teacher before the publication of Reducción de las letras, y arte para enseñar a hablar los mudos (or Simplification of the Letters of the Alphabet and Method of Teaching Deaf Mutes to Speak). Bonet was a soldier by trade and returned to this occupation after his brief interlude as an educator
of the deaf. It was by way of this military profession that Bonet was introduced to the Condestable (or constable) of Castile, Juan Fernández de Velasco, and was eventually employed as his assistant and secretary (Daniels 21-22). After the constable’s death, which left his wife the Duchess with three children under the age of four, she sought a teacher for her three-year old son who had lost his hearing from an illness the year before (Daniels 22). As previously stated, Don Manuel Ramírez de Carrión administered this desired education for four years until, in 1619, Ramírez de Carrión was unable to continue his instruction. Edward L. Scouten asserts that it was Bonet, and not the Duchess, who sought out the help of Carrión and “wept, cajoled, smiled, and promised that only good things would result if only the Marquis de Priego would release Carrión for awhile to serve as the teacher of the child, Luis de Velasco” (19). Other historians, however, do not present this interpretation of Bonet. Scouten asserts in his chapter on Bonet that all of his actions were stimulated by “compassion” for his young lord and that even his close observation of Carrión’s methods were done because “Above all, Bonet was anxious for Carrión to succeed with Luis” (Scouten 20). Upon the event of Carrión’s resignation, history records that Bonet volunteered to teach Don Luís. Following the instruction of Don Luís (after Carrión had undertaken the bulk of his initial education) Bonet never taught another deaf pupil. Most scholars have not attempted to proffer a conclusive motivation for Bonet’s sudden interest in teaching his young master, though Scouten and Kenneth W. Hodgson both suggest optimistic interpretations of Bonet’s actions.\(^\text{11}\) It was only one year after Bonet began teaching Don Luís – and his first year ever attempting the feat

\(^{11}\) In Scouten’s narrative of Bonet’s role in the education of Don Luís, he describes Bonet’s plagiarism of Carrión’s methods as a service that Bonet did for the more experienced instructor: “Ironically, this omission [of credit for Carrión] today subtly magnifies Carrión’s importance in the early history of education of the deaf. Without Carrión and his work, there surely would be no Bonet to be honored today” (21). In this way, Scouten somewhat liberally interprets Bonet’s appropriation as ultimately beneficial for Carrión. In line with Scouten’s flattering portrayal of Bonet, Daniels states that one historian, Kenneth W. Hodgson, has argued in his account that Bonet had “a brother who was deaf and dumb from an early age” and implies this as the reason for Bonet’s interest in Don Luís (22). Daniels states that “Other authors make no mention of Bonet’s deaf brother,” which leaves Bonet’s motivation open for scholarly interpretation (22).
with ostensibly no prior experience or consideration of the methodology other than through observation of Carrión — that Bonet published *Reducción de las letras, y arte para enseñar a hablar los mudos* in 1620. Bonet’s book was the “first published book to include a procedure to follow to teach the deaf,” and since its publication in 1620, “it has influenced the instruction of hearing impaired individuals for centuries” (Daniels 23). Following Bonet’s education of Don Luís, the almost immediate publication of Carrión’s borrowed methods for instructing the deaf seems to indicate that Bonet intended to capitalize on his three-year stint as the teacher of Don Luís.

Nonetheless, we do have Bonet to thank for circulating the sixteenth-century pedagogy of the instructors Ponce de León and Carrión because neither one published their methods for instructing the deaf. In his prologue to the work, Bonet claims his own unique inventiveness, implying that his method of instruction for Don Luís sprang from his own private contemplation (and not from his avid observation of Carrión’s instruction).12 Despite his attested originality, Bonet “did not introduce any original methods in his teaching but followed the techniques of Pedro Ponce and Ramírez as he had seen them applied” (Vickrey Van Cleve qtd. in Daniels 22). Bonet’s resourcefulness in recognizing the value of such a publication is certainly impressive, and as a result, Bonet’s book helped to kick-start a continental interest in educating the hearing impaired. As such, it has received global acclaim for being “the literary foundation stone of deaf education,” and Bonet has continued to be hailed as one of the most influential originators of Deaf education (Daniels 23).

The publication of Bonet’s book was not the only cause for his spreading fame across the continent and in England; the fame of Juan Pablo Bonet was also carried tangentially through the

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12 Heavily insinuating his instruction of Don Luís as an independent endeavor, Bonet writes, “[T]he sages of old and modern philosophers, the most studious examiners into nature and her wonderful effects…have either never sought a remedy for [the deaf], or have never found one…I began, as became a grateful and faithful servant…to search with particular diligence, contemplating, examining, and testing Nature in every way wherein she seems to supplement by the other senses that which is lacking in any one” (68-69, trans. H.N. Dixon).
showcasing of Don Luís’ language acquisition. While still under Ramírez de Carrión’s instruction, Don Luís de Velasco became somewhat of a celebrity and curiosity in Spain and abroad. The most well known account of Don Luís was published by Kenelm Digby twenty years after the initial spectacle in 1644; the delayed publication also contributed to mistakes in the report, for credit is mistakenly applied to Bonet rather than Carrión. Digby’s published and widely circulated account recorded the spectacle of Don Luís’ performances before the courts of distinguished rulers, such as the future King Charles I. Digby writes that while visiting the Spanish court in 1623 (when the Prince of Wales, soon to be Charles I of England, had traveled to Madrid to seek the hand of Doña Maria in marriage), he witnessed Don Luís perform his deafness for the entire court. 13 Don Luis was apparently put to the test and challenged to parrot multiple languages, including Spanish, English, and Welsh, through his ability to lip-read and mimic the words he saw articulated on the lips of others.

In his Two Treatises: In the one of which, The Nature of Bodies; In the other, The Nature of Man’s Soule, published roughly twenty years after his first encounter with Don Luís, Digby used the account as proof positive of the human body’s innate ability to adapt upon the loss of one sense. After describing the Spanish Lord as a young man so profoundly deaf that “if a gunne were shott off close by his eare, he could not heare it” and lamenting that a youth so physically attractive should suffer the impediment of deafness, Digby relates that a priest “vndertooke…teaching him to vnderstand

13 I use the phrase “perform his deafness” because deafness is not a debility that is as visibly recognizable as a physical impairment, such as a missing limb, would be. It is not until the Deaf use sign language – an “inaudible, nonphonic language [that] springs into view, flashing about the hands” (Mitchell 396) – or a hearing person attempts to engage them in oral conversation that their lack of hearing becomes evident. In the case of Don Luís, his deafness might not have been readily noticed if he wasn’t called upon to attempt speaking in front of crowds as a form of entertainment.
others when they spoke, and to speake himselfe that others might understand him” (Digby 254). Digby’s description of Don Luís’ physical attractiveness seems to counter any physiognomic suggestion that his deafness might point to a soul warped by the ugliness of sin. Rather, he emphasized Don Luís’ beauty and religious capacity with a physical description rivaling Petrarchan blazons: the “loueliness of his face and especially the exceeding life and spiritefulness of his eyes, and the comelinesse of his person and whole composure of his body throughout, were pregnant signes of a well tempered mind within” (Digby 254). Digby’s description of Don Luís, inspired by his encounter with Don Luís and the proof of the young lord’s educability and intellect, in itself suggests Digby’s own capacity to think counter-culturally about the deaf. The spectacle that Digby witnessed and then circulated in later publications, unfolded in this way:

He could discerne in an other, whether he spoke shrill or lowe: and he would repeate after any body, any hard word whatsoeuer. Which the Prince tryed often; not only in English, but by making some Welchmen that serued his Highnesse, speake wordes of their language. Which he so perfectly echoed, that I confesse I wondered more at that, then at all the rest. ...He expressed it (surely) in a high measure, by his so exact imitation of the welch pronunciation: for that tongue (like the Hebrew) employeth much the guttural letters: and the motions of that part which frameth them, can not be scene nor judged by the eye, otherwise then by the effect they may happily make by consent in the other partes of the mouth, exposed to view: for the knowledge he had of what they said, sprung from his observing the motions they made; so that he could converse currently in the light, though they he talked with, whispered neuer so softly. And I haue seene him at the distance of a large chambers breadth, say wordes after one, that I standing close by the speaker could not heare a syllable of. But if he were in the darke, or if one turned his face out of his sight, he was capable of [discerning] nothing one said. But it is time that we returne to our theame,  

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14 Digby here confuses the identity of Don Luís’ instructor. Perhaps, as Chaves and Soler speculate, Digby was informed of Fray Pedro Ponce’s instruction of Don Luís’ granduncles and conflated this achievement with that of Carrión’s (243). In 1623, Kenelm Digby met Don Luís’ “evasive and secretive teacher Manuel Ramírez de Carrión” at the time he saw Don Luís at court (Chaves and Soler 241). Digby claims that at the publication of his report that the “priest” was now “in the seruice of the Prince of Carignan, where he continueth...the same employment as he did with the Constables Brother” (Digby 255), a position which Carrión in fact held starting in 1636 (Bonet’s death occurred in 1633). Bonet had already left his position in service of the Condestable in 1621, two years before Digby witnessed Don Luís’ performance (Chaves and Soler 242). With these facts, we can confirm that Digby was referring to Manuel Ramírez de Carrión as the “priest.” This understanding leads to in another error in Digby’s report, for he writes that the “priest” had published a book in Spanish detailing his methods. The book he refers to is most likely Reduccion de las letras, y arte para enseñar a habla los mudos, written by Bonet and not by Ramírez de Carrión.
Digby’s account of Don Luís held particular appeal to seventeenth-century English practitioners and theorists of deaf education. Digby provocatively claimed Don Luís’ perfect articulation of multiple languages, and accordingly, Cram and Maat fashion Don Luís as “the embodiment of the oralist ideal: a profoundly deaf person who partakes fully in oral conversations as though he were hearing, with only an inconstancy in the tone of his voice betraying that he was not” (*Teaching Language* 30).

Most early modern theoreticians and practitioners of deaf education, including John Bulwer, George Dalgarno, and William Holder, responded enthusiastically to Digby’s report in their own published explorations of teaching the deaf to read, write, and speak English.

**The Continuation of Deaf Education in Early Modern England**

The influence of Spanish deaf education, relayed through the accounts of Francisco Valles and Kenelm Digby, was instrumental in the progression of English interest in educating the deaf. Valles’ accounts were cited first in John Wilkins 1642 *Mercury: or the Secret and Swift Messenger*. Wilkins was particularly interested in alternative means of communication for the hearing. In one chapter among over twenty in the collection of coded and secret forms of communication, Wilkins describes that gestures or natural signing might be used to secretly converse. Still, Wilkins does not recognize these gestures as actual language as much as code, which is unsurprising given the speech-centric ideology of the early modern era. Wilkins’ chapter mentions the account of Valles, who attests to the successful teaching of Ponce de León, and he uses this as a proof for *ex placito* signing: “when these signs have their signification from use and mutual compact” (*Mercury* 113). Wilkins refers to Ponce de León in order to verify that gestures carry significance but does not use the account to suggest further education of the deaf. For this reason, it is John Bulwer who is credited with the first English book for educating the deaf. Within *Mercury*, Wilkins acknowledges the communication capacity of
natural signing among the deaf and mute when he states, “there will pass [such signs] betwixt such
as are born both Deaf and Dumb; who are able by this means alone, to answer and reply unto one
another as directly as if they had the benefit of Speech” (114). The rest of Wilkins’ brief chapter
outlines his understanding of dactylology (using the joints and fingers of the hand to signify a
manual alphabet or numbering system) and how it might be used for covert conversation. Wilkins’
advise for a manual alphabet is delivered through written description rather than by drawings. A
portion of his description will suffice for an understanding of the whole: “Let the tops of the fingers
signifie the five vowels; the middle parts, the five first consonants; the bottoms of them, the five
next consonants; the spaces betwixt the fingers, the four next. One finger laid on the side of the
hand may signifie T, two fingers V the consonant, three W, the little finger crossed X, the wrist Y,
the middle of the hand Z” (117). It is very likely that later educators and theorists of the deaf –
especially William Holder and John Wallis – knew of Wilkins’ work because like Wilkins, all three
men were known members of the Royal Society and in close communication with each other. However, in his later exploration of a “philosophical language” in the 1660s, Wilkins was known to
have sought out the phonetic expertise of Holder and Wallis rather than vice versa.

In addition to Valles’ account, the record of Don Luís’ speech performances ultimately
stirred “some of England’s sharpest thinkers into action regarding the predicament of deafness”
(Scouten 25). After Digby recounted the occurrence in his 1644 publication, Two Treatises, the first
man to respond to it was John Bulwer, a physician by trade. Bulwer’s first publication, Chirologia; or,

15 This manual alphabet bears many correspondences with modern BSL (British Sign Language) – for
instance, pointing to the tops of the five fingers of one hand still are used to indicate vowels, and the letters
T, V, X, Y, and Z are still signed roughly the same as Wilkins describes. In contrast, the manual alphabet of
ASL is vastly different and holds little to no correspondence with Wilkins’ description or with modern BSL.
In fact, the ASL alphabet more closely aligns with the Spanish alphabet recorded by Bonet in 1620, which
speaks again of his global and timeless influence on deaf education.

16 As Cram and Maat note in their summative biography, John Wilkins “was to become a central figure in the
Royal Society…[as both] a founding member…and its first secretary in 1662” (Teaching Language 27).
The Naturall Language of the Hand, and Chironomia; or, The Art of Manual Rhetoric, was published the same year and was most likely unaffected by Digby’s tale. *Chirologia* clearly demonstrates Bulwer’s fascination for and advancement of human gesture as a form of language common to all men. As it turns out, Bulwer’s follow-up publication, *Philocophus; or, The Deafe and Dumbe Mans Friend* (published in 1648), incorporated his philosophical speculation on the nature of gesture with an exploration of natural signing as a language system. In it, Bulwer directly quoted, almost in its entirety, Digby’s published account of Don Luís. Despite the fact that Digby’s account is marked by a conspicuous absence of any “mention of written language…manual alphabet” nor “signing by simple gestures or by conventional sign language,” Bulwer utilizes Digby’s account as a springboard to discuss natural signing among the deaf (*Teaching Language* 30). *Philocophus* was “the first book on deaf education to appear in Britain,” and similarly to *Chirologia*, as Cram and Maat claim, Bulwer wrote it “without knowledge of the contents of Bonet’s book” (*Teaching Language* 27). Bulwer’s profound interest in deaf education and the sociopolitical agency of the deaf is clearly outlined in *Philocophus*; notwithstanding, Bulwer was never known to have taken a deaf pupil under his wing.¹⁷ Furthermore, though Bulwer’s arguments are profound in their countercultural speculation, they were almost entirely disregarded by his contemporaries. In fact, as David Cram and Jaap Maat assert, “Bulwer’s book, if taken into account at all [by other seventeenth-century developers of deaf pedagogy], exerted little influence on either the practice or the theory of teaching language to the deaf in the

¹⁷ Though Bulwer was never known to have taught the deaf, he had multiple interactions and relationships with them. In the introduction to his text, Bulwer lists several acquaintances and friends among the deaf, including Chirothea, the Gostwicke brothers (sons of a baronet), and Mr. Crispe. Nelson argues that “These interactions with deaf people indicate a greater influence on Bulwer’s rhetoric – and therefore on the rhetorical tradition – than might be supposed…It is *Philocophus* that truly indicates his use of sign language [on] behalf of eloquence” (“Bulwer’s Speaking Hands” 183). Furthermore, some scholars (such as Jennifer Nelson) speculate whether the young child Bulwer adopted, named Chirothea (mentioned above and who I have included among his deaf acquaintainces), might have been hearing impaired because the name itself means literally, “one who uses sign language” (“Bulwer’s Speaking Hands” 182).
seventeenth century” (Teaching Language 37). Nonetheless, the unique understanding and praise of the deaf demonstrated in Bulwer’s works merit full exploration.

Bulwer’s text was groundbreaking in its efforts to study sign language and elevate the importance of gesture in terms of general rhetorical eloquence, but he was still working within the pathological paradigm of early modern “oralist” ideology. At the time, the goal of education for the deaf was to teach them to be able to function in a world prioritizing speech as the primary form of communication. As a result, though Bulwer elevates sign language as a linguistic code and praises the deaf for their ingenuity in developing it for communication, the purpose of his theoretical exploration still aligns with the “curative” approach to speech acquisition, which prioritized lip-reading and the vocalization of spoken language by learning the mechanics of pronunciation. As Bulwer’s subtitle to Philocophus states: the book is meant to “enable one [who is deaf] with an observant Eie, to Heare what any man speaks by the moving of his lips. Upon the same Ground, with the advantage of an Historiell Exemplification, apparently proving, That a Man borne Deafe and Dumbe, may be taught to Heare the sound of words with his Eie, & thence learne to speake with his Tongue.” Similar to the ways in which teachers of foreign language instruct their students to pronounce words in the sought-after language (or L2), deaf pedagogues such as William Holder, painstakingly drilled their deaf students on different considerations of pronunciation.18

18 Concerning “dental,” “labial,” and “guttural” pronunciation, instructors parsed how to properly articulate vowels, consonants, and words in general (Philocophus 3). Both the “dental” and “labial” aspects incorporated the positioning of the tongue in the mouth and the shaping of the lips around words. To accomplish this instructors such as Holder, encouraged other teachers to “provide a Palat with the upper jaw, of Plaster, and the shape of a Tong of stuffed Leather, which will be useful to you to describe to him, how the Bosse of the Tong in these Letters [K and G] is born close in the inner part of the Palat near the Throat; and more useful, when you would describe the Vowels: but yet both may be done without it” (“An Appendix Concerning Persons Deaf and Dumb” 216).
Through painstaking description and most likely some aspect of “show and tell” through gesture, instructors tutored deaf students on recognizing where to place their tongues in pronouncing specific phonemes or syllables; this could include lateral placement, near the teeth or nearer the throat, and horizontal placement, at the roof of the mouth or at its floor. Furthermore, instructors had to teach pupils how to shape, move, or even close their lips in the vocalization of different consonants and vowels. Further, deaf students were taught as much as possible how to strike the proper tone while making utterances. Understandably, mimicking speech depended entirely on the individual instructor’s subjective interpretation of proper pronunciation as well as their skill in imparting concepts of sound to those who had no concept of it. It also depended on the student’s own self-perception and ability to recognize his own constriction or relaxation of the muscles in the throat as a means of controlling pitch or the placement of sound in the throat rather than adenoidal passages to avoid nasal resonance. In his description of vocal resonance, Bulwer compares the sound of the voice to that of the musical instruments “pipe” and “lute,” drawing an arguably unhelpful explanation for deaf individuals incapable of recognizing such changes in resonance and tone (*Philocophus* 9). Bulwer’s choice of comparison suggests that his book addresses phoneticians and potential instructors of the deaf more than it does the deaf themselves because the hearing impaired would not be aided by an example that relies upon hearing.

In *Philocophus*, the majority of Bulwer’s theory on speech is done through written descriptions and comparisons and does not include drawings, but the ultimate aim of Bulwer’s book is not to serve as a handbook for those who would instruct the deaf; rather, Bulwer’s goal is the validation of

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19 One must continue to distinguish “gesture” from “signing”; the former can be equated to mimicry and pointing whereas the latter (even in the early modern period) is more closely associated with a language system with its own vocabulary. Most deaf educators in the early modern era were not fluent in natural signing as the deaf themselves and their families seemed to be, based on the letters of the Gawdy brothers. Therefore, when they utilized natural signing, it was often in the form of a manual alphabet and select signs depending on their inclination for learning the natural signing of their deaf pupil.
the deaf, their language, and their capacity to learn. Despite his description of vocalization, Bulwer’s primary interest was not speech but gesture, and this eventually led to a particular fascination with natural signing as a gestural language system; therefore, he does not expend as much energy describing how to teach speech to the hearing impaired as later educators of the deaf did. Instead, Bulwer discusses speech only so far as it is impacted by gesture: “In his conflation of gestures and speech on the plane of bodily motions, Bulwer embodies the elocutionary movement’s focus on the issue of delivery through the controlling of the various parts of the body and its motions, as well as voice modulation, matters that arise from nature and its ‘imprints’” (Nelson, “Bulwer’s Speaking Hands” 183-184). Responding to early modern England’s general belief that “eloquence was speech and that to be a true human being, one had to hear and therefore speak,” Bulwer “attempts to write gestures and corporeality against a historically established religious and rhetorical body of work where the tongue is the ‘power of eloquence and reason’” (“Bulwer’s Speaking Hands” 185). In contrast, Bulwer elevates gesture above speech in its importance for effective communication: “Speech divided from the hand is unsound, and, brought into a poor and low condition…flags and creeps upon the ground… without the concurrence of the hand, the mouth is but a running sore and hollow fistula of the mind” (Chironomia 157). In Chironomia, Bulwer emphasizes the importance of gesture in communication and as communication, and later in Philocophus, Bulwer consequently elevates natural signing as gestural communication on the same status as any other language (“Bulwer’s Speaking Hands” 183). Bulwer drew on his “familiarity with deaf people and sign language to extend the field of rhetoric” to insist that “sign language…[should]

20 Though Warring Wilkinson in 1881 took a pioneering attitude as he labeled signing as a veritable language and claimed that “no one, so far as my reading extends, has recognized [sign language’s] value as an element in comparative philology” (173), over two hundred years prior, John Bulwer had already specifically designated natural signing as “a language more natural and significant” than speech, calling the bodies of deaf individuals as “Tongue[s]” to express their minds (Philocophus A3r-A3v).
extend [to] the field of rhetoric,” and to validate “sign language [in general] and [encourage] the
development of the intellect of deaf people” (“Bulwer’s Speaking Hands” 187). Bulwer argues,
“What though you [deaf individuals] cannot expresse your mindes in those verball contrivances of
mans invention; yet you want not speech, who have your whole Body, for a Tongue, having a
language more natural and significant, which is common to you with us, to wit gesture, the general
and universall language of Humane nature” (Philocophus A3r-A3v). Even more explicitly, Bulwer
continues his praise of the deaf and their language in his opening remarks to Philocophus as he
describes how his admiration of their communication inspired his own study of gesture:

This language you speak so purely, that I who was the first that made it my Darling study to
interpret the naturall richnesse of our discoursing gestures, not onely to the [distinguishing]
of all the Corporall and Nationall Dialects thereof, and regulating the naturall as Accessories
and Adjuncts of Rhetoricall Elocution; but to the following of them downe to their spring-
heads and originall…by that thorough progresse of observation, am fully satisfied that you
want nothing to be perfectly understood, your mother tongue administring sufficient
utterance upon all occasions. (A3v-A4v, original emphasis)

Bulwer’s texts contain a humanizing narrative for the deaf that is vastly more palatable for the
modern reader; however, his works proved to lack any significant influence in his era and in the
centuries following their publication.21

It is clear from the beginning of John Bulwer’s Philocophus (and his acknowledgements in
Chirologia and Chironomia) that his motivation for publishing his works was the benefit that might be
derived for the deaf themselves. His predominant aim was the formation of a school for the deaf, a

21 One cannot help but wonder if the story regarding sociohistorical perceptions of the deaf might have
transformed more rapidly – likewise if sign language would have been recognized as an official language
sooner than 1988, when the Parliament of the European Union unanimously approved the recognition of
signed languages – had Bulwer’s texts been the primary reference for the education of the deaf rather than
Juan Pablo Bonet’s, John Wallis’, or William Holder’s. Furthermore, one can only imagine what cultural
progress regarding the status of the deaf might have occurred over time if the foundational philosophy of
defef education, beginning in the seventeenth century, was a heightened valuation of the hearing impaired as
“perfections… object[s] of admiration” and of their signing as a legitimate and even “more natural and
significant” language than human speech.
proposal ridiculed by his peers because the conventional attitude up to this historical point was that the deaf were uneducable. Bulwer’s ultimate goal at the time was incredibly countercultural, a fact which he admits to in the work itself:

I began in Idea, to conceive the modell of a new Academie, which might be erected in favour of those who are in your condition, to wit originally deafe and dumb, for which Edifice and Gymnasium having provided all kinde of materials requisite, I soone perceived by falling into discourse with some rationall men about such a designe, that the attempt seemed so paradoxical, prodigious, and Hyperbolicall; that it did rather amuse then satisfy their understandings, insomuch as they tooke the tearmes and expressions this Art justly usurpes for insufferable violations of their reason, which they professed they must renounce before they could have faith to credit such an undertaking. (A5v, original emphasis)

While the knowledge of natural signing began to be used as evidence of the deaf’s educational capability and furthermore incorporated into the beginning stages of early modern deaf pedagogy, the age-old stigma that proclaimed the opposite (that the deaf were incapable of reason or education) still held particular sway in early modern society. Bulwer directly addresses this false assumption by condemning the “incredulous” responses of these supposed learned men who cannot conceive that the deaf might be capable of overcoming such an impairment:

So lazie and sluggish are the naturall inclinations of most men, that they are prone to limit the infinite capacity of man, and the effects of his admirable observations, to known and common Matters: whereas considering his abilities, and the fertillity of his Braine, there is no accident of imperfection that may befall him, but with the indulgent cooperation of Nature, he may work himselfe either out of it, or invent a supply to the defect and inconveniences of it. (Philocophus 55)

Several chapters later, Bulwer criticizes the men of his age who limit the possibilities of the deaf because they have no prior knowledge of success in deaf education: “because they cannot conceive how it can be done, therefore [they assume] it cannot be done, as if all invention were limited within the narrow sphere of their capacity” (Philocophus 139). He denounces the men of his age who are “too superstitiously devoted to the received Phylosophy [of the time]” to believe that the deaf are capable of learning and that they deserve education in formal institutions.
In contrast to the predominant presumption that the deaf were incapable of learning, the foundation for Bulwer’s unorthodox argument was the belief that the deaf were educable, and he draws from their personal development of a signed language system as his proof. Bulwer stated that by publishing *Philocophus*, he hoped to squash narrow assumptions once and for all by verifying the “Phylosophicall verity of this Art [sign language]…having gained an unanswerable Demonstration [of their educability] from matter of fact” as evidence for future “like successe” in acquiring English in speech and writing (A5v-A6r, original emphasis).\(^2\) The deaf, Bulwer states, have overcome the “defect” of hearing loss through the use of their own manual language. This in itself for Bulwer is evidence of ingenuity and educability, and upon this proof, Bulwer asserts an educational institution for the deaf would be both logical and feasible. Given the representation of the deaf and blind in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literature, Bulwer’s positive defense of the deaf is almost shocking in its overt rejection of inherited medieval religious stigmas of the impaired. Bulwer argues that many of his contemporaries misunderstand the nature of the deaf and consider them “misprisions in nature,” yet astoundingly, he responds with his own progressive observations: “yet to me who have studied your perfections, and well observed the strange recompences Nature affords you, I behold nothing in you [deaf individuals] but what may be a just object of admiration!” (emphasis mine, A2v). Though arguably the first of its kind, Bulwer’s works regarding the deaf, their natural signing, and the possibilities of speech acquisition was soon followed by a flood of

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\(^2\) Similarly in France, rejecting the historical “link between language, knowledge, and the lack of sight or hearing [that] was a recurrent theme,” René Descartes rejected the correlation that had been inaccurately drawn between sensory impairment and educability: “We observe that magpies and parrots can utter words like ourselves, and are yet unable…to show that they understand what they say; in place of which men born deaf and dumb…destitute of the organs which others use in speaking, are in the habit of spontaneously inventing certain signs by which they discover their thoughts to those who, being usually in their company, have leisure to learn their language” (98-99). In his own observations of language and rationality in human beings, Descartes “invokes the fact that deaf-mutes use sign language to support his claim that all and only humans have language, and a rational soul” (“Introduction” 4).
theoretical and pedagogical treatises. Although Bulwer’s proposal regarding the deaf was largely theoretical, his description of the deaf illustrates his celebration of biodiversity in humanity and does not relegate the deaf to subnormal strictures.

In a time when the predominant assumption was that the deaf were uneducable, if not comparable to the mentally insane, John Bulwer not only expressed admiration for the deaf themselves – praising their ingenuity in developing natural signing – but also advocated for them by proposing institutionalized and inclusive deaf education.

Presenting a similar defense of signed language in his own 1656 tract “The deaf and dumb man’s discourse,” the Dutch physician Anton Deusing argued for the legitimacy of natural signing and for the eligibility of the deaf for salvation. Deusing’s work seemed to be an homage to Bulwer’s Philoposphus: or, The deafe and dumb mans friend in not only philosophy but in its similar titling. Deusing’s Latin work, published originally in the Netherlands in 1656, was later translated and republished in 1670 as an original work by “George Sibscota,” a man whose actual identity is still unknown to this day.23 In Teaching Language to a Boy Born Deaf, Deusing’s text is described as “an appraisal of the sign language used in a community of deaf-mutes [as consisting] of two elements: first, in terms of expressive power, it is fully equivalent to spoken language, and secondly, it is conventional and must be learned and practiced before it can be used” (40). In relation to the conventional views on natural signing, expressed largely in the deaf pedagogic literature of the time,

Both elements of Deusing’s view of sign language contradict what may have been widespread beliefs: first, that sign language is a primitive, defective means of communication, only usable to convey some simple messages, and lacking the structure required for the expression of complex and abstract meanings; secondly, that sign language relies entirely on iconicity, consisting of gestures that visually imitate the objects referred to, and in that sense is ‘natural’ rather than conventional. (Teaching Language 40)

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23 I quote passages from the translated work, which bear the reference “Sibscota” but should be understood as Deusing’s intellectual positions, espoused by some unknown and most likely Protestant English citizen.
The validation of signing in “The deaf and dumb man’s discourse” served Deusing’s critical purpose: in his work, Deusing argued primarily that he believed that deaf-mutes were entitled to salvation in the Catholic Church, an assertion that seems obvious to the modern reader but nonetheless was not readily accepted in the historical church. In order to prove his assertion, Deusing argued that the deaf demonstrated their capacity for rationality and understanding through the use of natural signing: “experience teaches us, and there are also many obvious examples among us, that those that are originally Dumb, and Deaf do by certain gestures, and various motions of the body as readily and clearly declare their mind, to those with whom they have been often conversant, as if they could speak, and likewise by such gestures of other Persons, they do absolutely understand the intentions of their mind also” (Sibscota qtd. in Teaching Language 39). Deusing’s appraisal of natural signing runs parallel to Bulwer’s own arguments for natural signing to be considered a legitimate language system, for Deusing argues, “those very significations of things, which Mutes make use of, proceed not from nature, but from their own institution no more, than our speech” (Sibscota qtd. in Teaching Language 40). Because of this, it seems likely that Deusing was familiar with Bulwer’s work. Though Bulwer’s texts apparently had little effect on the progression of thought regarding deaf pedagogy in England, his works were apparently read and referenced in other European countries. Because of Bulwer’s elevation of natural signing as a language, he proves to be centuries ahead of his time and certainly countercultural in terms of early modern ideology, as future discussion will demonstrate.

In both Bulwer’s and Deusing’s arguments, they reference the “obvious examples” of deaf individuals who taught themselves or had been taught rudimentary signing as well as reading and
A striking example of this reality can be found in the extant letters of the Gawdy brothers, John and Framlingham, several of which are reproduced in Peter Jackson’s *The Gawdy Manuscripts*. Deafness was apparently an inherited trait in the Gawdy family, so when two of Sir William Gawdy and Elizabeth Duffield’s five children were born deaf, they were not prevented from education. As we learned from Marilyn Daniels’ work, the norm in early modern Europe was that any deaf children of landed or wealthy gentlemen were denied inheritance via primogeniture because they could not validate their entitlement in their country’s primary language in either writing or speech. As described in *The Gawdy Manuscripts*, John and Framlingham were part of a wealthy and landed family; their father William held a baronetcy that was later passed down to John because he could demonstrate his ability to read and write and was therefore eligible to claim his title as the surviving eldest son after his two elder brothers died of smallpox. In fact, in addition to fluency in their own natural signed language (though both were mute), John and Framlingham both proved capable of eloquent, fluent English. However,

24 As was the case with the education of the deaf in Spain, at this time in early modern England, it was primarily privileged upper classes and nobility who could afford to teach their children to read, write, and lip-read English. Early modern literacy rates for the general population (for the hearing and deaf alike) were extremely low as reading and writing ability was reserved for the privileged. Note that this is the case with John and Framlingham Gawdy, who were the sons of a baronet. Peter Jackson argues that the education of both John and Framlingham was undertaken by one of the Cressener family, “who were a family of teachers and priests who had a close association with the West Harling Gawdys through three generations” (*The Gawdy Manuscripts* 14). Cressener referenced in a 1654 letter that he had found a “remarkibel booke” which enclosed a “fingerspelling-sign system,” and Jackson argues that Cressener most likely used this book in the educations of both John and Framlingham (*The Gawdy Manuscripts* 14-15). Given that the brothers were born in 1639 and 1641, respectively, their education would have begun in the mid-1640s. Because of this dating, it is most likely, the “remarkikel booke” that Cressener references was most likely a copy of John Wilkins’ *Mercury: or the secret and swift messenger*, which was published in 1642. One can assume that in contrast to the privileged classes, those of the lower and working classes would have communicated with some natural signing among their family and closest friends and may have acquired some skill in lip-reading, as a survival mechanism. Such is the case with Bulwer’s acquaintance, Mr. Crispe, a deaf merchant whose deafness proved an asset in his business and made him a great success. In some cases, “he might chance to overheare with his eye newes of the arrival of some shippe and of some good bargaine; when others who would perhaps keepe the intelligence to themselves were not aware of it” (*Philosophus* 177). Bulwer also describes that whereas the noise prominent in a bustling market place might prove a distraction for the hearing, Mr. Crispe would not be affected and could observe men’s mouths as in any other situation in life (*Philosophus* 177).
Framlingham (the younger brother) was the better letter-writer and wrote more frequently rather than having an amanuensis write his signed/dictated letters. In fact, Framlingham Gawdy may be one of the first (if not the very first) deaf individuals who wrote his own will, on May 2, 1672. The will itself is signed by Framlingham and attests on the back: “These instructions for a Will were written in the proper handwritinge of the said Framlingham Gaudy who is a person both deafe and dumbe and soe not able otherwise to expresse his minde and this was written…the Second daye of May 1672 in the presence of Wm Smuth Preb: Norv: B. Gibson.” (as reproduced in The Gawdy Manuscripts 52-54). Though Framlingham often wrote his own letters, John resorted more frequently to dictating his letters by sign to his wife, children, and close friends.

As is mentioned by Edward Scousten in Turning Points in the Education of the Deaf, there was a historical precedent for the deaf to become artists: such was the case for Quintus Pedius, who was granted special permission by the Emperor Augustus, “to study to become an artist” in the first century AD (7). Because they had been born into privilege and did not need employment to survive, both John and Framlingham could afford to undertake studying a discipline that appealed to their creativity and talent. Therefore, both brothers became artists who studied under the Dutch painter Sir Peter Lely, and John was known to be one of the finest “limners” in England (The Gawdy Manuscripts 66). In his own account, Bulwer also notes Sir Edward Gostwicke, another deaf noble born into his father’s baronetcy in Wellington, as being “an excellent Limbner, invited to that art by his Genius” (Philocophus 83). As Jackson relates, both John and Framlingham were known to have stayed with and been tutored in art by the art master George Freeman, while they studied more broadly under Lely. Freeman was believed to have been fluent himself in natural signing, for he had two daughters, roughly 10-15 years older than John and Framlingham, who were deaf-mutes

25 “Limners” were painters of both miniature and regular-sized portraits.
themselves (*The Gawdy Manuscripts* 31-32). That Freeman was conversant, or at least understood both brothers’ signing, is made clear by the details he provides in his letters to Sir William Gawdy. One such example of Freeman’s understanding of Framlingham’s signing was written in early 1664: “Mr Framham was somewhat discontented that he had not black clothes for he mad signs that the Court was in morning and that he was ashamed to goe see his friende in his old ones” (qtd. in *The Gawdy Manuscripts* 36-37). Although certainly not a large population, there were those in London who could understand or sign themselves. Furthermore, it is likely that, given their rarity, the deaf and their families and friends would most likely have been acquainted with each other through their shared experience of being deaf themselves, or knowing someone deaf. This is made evident in another letter from George Freeman when in February 1665, being unable to assist Framlingham in one of his many bouts of sickness, Freeman suggested that Sir William hire “a good nurse that can signe to looke after him” (qtd. in *The Gawdy Manuscripts* 38). Whether or not this was accomplished is not recorded; however, the suggestion that such a nurse could be found carries the implication that there were other individuals in London who could converse via natural signing. This also suggests that even if most early modern authors of published handbooks for language acquisition did not recognize natural signing as a viable form of communication, there were many in close contact with the deaf who considered it exactly that.

Regarding the impression that John Gawdy left on others, in addition to his fame as a painter, the diarist John Evelyn records his encounter with Sir John Gawdy, Lady Anne Gawdy, and their two children after he met them during a Church dedication party at the estate of Lord Arlington on September 7, 1677. “There dined this day at my Lord’s one Sir John Gaudy,” writes Evelyn, “a very handsome person, but quite dumb, yet very intelligent by signs, and a very fine painter; he was so civil and well bred, as it is not possible to discern any imperfection in him. His
wife and children were also there and he was at church in the morning with us” (qtd. in The Gawdy Manuscripts 56-57). The extant letters of the Gawdys indicate that the education of the deaf in England, though certainly taxing and difficult, was undertaken for a privileged few. The letters also suggest that the deaf, and those in close association with the deaf, may have been aware of each other’s existence and sought each other out, as is suggested by Freeman’s request that Framlingham be provided a nurse “that can signe.” The Gawdy brothers would most likely not have been of interest to contemporary educators of the deaf, such as Holder or Wallis, because they were mute and yet refused to attempt speaking. Though they were fluent in reading and writing English, they preferred to converse via natural signing. Whereas this preference for signing might have been considered a detriment to the acquisition of “real” language by theorists like Holder and Wallis, for Bulwer, the ability to communicate via signing was an asset and a marvel.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the unorthodox arguments found in George Hakewill’s The Vanitie of the Eye, namely in his suggestion that blindness is a condition for the sighted to envy. Bulwer’s own argumentation in Chirologia and in Philocophus aligns with Hakewill’s promotion of sensory impairment. Whereas Hakewill reveals the spiritual disadvantages caused by sight, Bulwer denounces speech as the most effective means of communication. In doing so, Bulwer creates a platform elevating the possibilities of sign language and gesture: “‘Tis apparent, that there’s no native law, or absolute necessity, that those thoughts which arise in our pregnant minde must by mediation of our tongue flow out in a vocall streame of words” (Chirologia 4). As Jennifer Nelson remarks, Bulwer “points out here that there is no compelling reason that people should talk” (“Bulwer’s Speaking Hands” 185); in Bulwer’s purview, the only element truly imperative for intelligible

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26 It is interesting that both Digby’s account and Evelyn’s account of Don Luís and John Gawdy, respectively, both emphasis their physical attractiveness as a support to their intellectual capacity. This seems to relate to the lingering belief in physiognomic correspondences in that the physical “soundness” observable on these deaf men’s visages should indicate an intellectual “soundness.”
communication is gesture. As he states in *Chirologia*, “as we can translate a thought into discoursing signs, so the conceptions of our mind are seen to abound in several dialects while the articulated fingers supply the office of a voice” (120). In other words, presupposing sight in the deaf and their communication, Bulwer argues that “the hand is fully capable of eloquence in its own right” (“Bulwer’s Speaking Hands” 186). Bulwer is unique in his recognition and praise of natural signing, for later pedagogues only encouraged signing in so far as it furthered the objective of speech acquisition. More importantly, following Bulwer’s groundbreaking theorizing, the experimentation and theories of William Holder, John Wallis, George Dalgarno, and other early modern practitioners of deaf education categorically demonstrated a change in disability perception. More and more, the push for deaf education – arguably stimulated by an inherited religious impulse for charitable and curative responses to the disabled – normalized the perception of the deaf as capable and educable.

**Developing the Pedagogy for English Acquisition**

Roughly fifteen years after the publications of Bulwer’s theoretical works on gesture and teaching the deaf, in the late 1650s, the parents of young Alexander Popham were seeking a teacher for their young deaf son. 27 Dr. William Holder (1616-98), “a general scholar, a very accomplished person, and a great virtuoso” (Hutton 650), was recommended for the job by his friends Seth Ward, John Wilkins, and Ralph Bathurst, who knew of Holder’s interest in phonetics (*Teaching Language* 65). Holder agreed to take the position, and it gave him the opportunity to “make careful observations on how speech sounds are produced” and to develop his own phonetic theories through the

27 More striking than the fact that Bulwer's texts preceded the practice and publications of other early modern English pedagogues of deaf education by roughly fifteen years is the fact that Bulwer's proposal for the establishment of a formal institution for deaf education in the United Kingdom preceded the actual formation of one by over 110 years. The proposal for such a school was published in Bulwer's foreword to *Philosophus* in 1648 whereas the formation of the first deaf school by Thomas Braidwood did not take place until 1760. Despite Bulwer's pioneering proposals and arguments, Cram and Maat remark that Bulwer's texts did not prove nearly as influential in the formation of deaf pedagogy as Wallis' and Holder's works.
experience of teaching speech to a deaf boy (Teaching Language 65). What becomes clear in the analysis of Holder’s contributions is that his education of Alexander Popham – the one and only deaf individual he attempted to educate – was not his primary objective. Cram and Maat state that “Holder’s interest in the subject [of phonetics] must have been known to several members of [the Royal Society]…[who] recommended him to Alexander Popham’s mother as a teacher” (Teaching Language 65). Though Cram and Maat do not explicitly state that the study of phonetics was Holder’s primary motivation for undertaking Popham’s education, it seems clear that Holder was drawn to this intriguing case in order to study phonetics and first language acquisition. Rather than pinpointing Holder’s instruction of Popham as stimulated by an interest in phonetics, Cram and Maat attribute the “theory of articulatory phonetics expounded in the Elements of speech, published in 1669” as resulting from this experimental instruction (Teaching Language 65).

Holder’s foundational question in the appendix to Elements of speech is whether or not one can teach a deaf person to speak solely by utilizing their sight. Again, though Holder seems to have technically been the first teacher of the deaf in England – a contentious title, as we will soon see – his instruction of Popham occurred roughly fifteen years after Bulwer had appealed in his books for this very thing. Unfortunately, Bulwer died in 1656, three years before Holder began to instruct Popham, and so Bulwer never witnessed the realization of deaf education in England. Holder’s education of Popham was brief indeed, lasting roughly one year, after which Popham was sent from Holder’s house in Bletchingdon back to his own estate.\(^{28}\) Within that year, Holder was later to claim that Popham had acquired an assured comprehension of spoken and written English. Because Holder had been a studied phonetician, he must have considered one year more than enough time to

\(^{28}\) In Henry Oldenburg’s “Preface by the Publisher of the Transactions,” which sought to pacify Holder’s outrage for having his efforts in educating Popham go unmentioned, Oldenburg recounts that Holder began his instruction of Popham in March 1659 and completed it “In the Summer following” when “Dr. Holder being upon removal to Ely…Mr. Popham returned home to his Friends” (qtd. in Teaching Language 236-37).
teach a deaf child to speak English. In contrast with Bulwer’s focus on gesture and natural signing, Holder’s *Elements of speech* is devoted to a phonetic study of speech. It is only the appendix that addresses deafness in relation to speech acquisition. Holder’s publication of this appendix, with its caveats on the difficulties of teaching the deaf, carries the implication that he either knew that other instructors, such as Wallis, had already begun developing their own methods or he believed that future teachers of the deaf would certainly surface in England.

Learning the alphabet via writing is an imperative step in Holder’s methods of instruction, not only because “he [the deaf pupil] is also to learn to write and read as others do” but also because the acquisition of speech (by sight) depends upon an understanding of how one forms and articulates the words on a page (“An Appendix Concerning Persons Deaf and Dumb” 215). Therefore, to accomplish teaching the deaf to speak by sight, Holder’s instruction began with teaching the English alphabet until Popham could write his letters “pretty well” (“An Appendix” 215). Holder’s directions for teaching speech always begin with the instruction to “Write” before he then offers the supplemental tools to “make signes” (specifically gestures, such as pointing at the desired word to be pronounced, and most likely not recognized word signs) or to personally demonstrate how to pronounce various phonemes (“An Appendix” 215). Taking a letter at a time, the instructor would have the student write the letter before having him observe the pronunciation of it on the lips of the instructor. The student would then be encouraged to attempt the same. Once the student correctly pronounced the letter, the instructor was to “Shew him upon the Paper the Letter [he pronounced]” to reinforce his understanding of the letter and its pronunciation, and then reward the student with “much applauding and encouraging” before having the student “repeat it often, till he be very perfect both in the pronunciation and in the written Character of that Letter”
Teaching speech, according to Holder, is difficult in multiple ways: the first difficulty is that the deaf are not accustomed to exercising their vocal chords since many congenitally or profoundly deaf individuals have never spoken at all, so “the Deaf Person must be gently and discreetly treated, and by all kind of pleasant usage wrought upon, to take some pains at it [speaking]…taking great care, that he may not hate his task, but do it cheerfully” (“An Appendix” 211). The second difficulty the teacher of the deaf faces, according to Holder, is teaching the articulation of “Some of the Consonants, and most of the Vowels,” for their articulation depends on such “obscure Motions and Figures, that the most Learned can hardly agree to describe them” (original emphasis, “An Appendix” 211). Also, clearly, the deaf do not have the capacity to hear subtle differences or sounds in letters or words as a reference while attempting to pronounce them. Finally, Holder states that one should expect the deaf not only to struggle to correctly produce “perfect pronunciation” themselves but also struggle in recognizing variations in speech patterns, which renders lip-reading and effective communication for the deaf nearly impossible (“An Appendix” 212).

Having addressed the difficulties that teachers of the deaf should anticipate, Holder recommends how one should go about helping the deaf acquire speech. To begin, Holder assumes that having been denied communication by the ear, “[the deaf’s] Necessity excites a great observation and sagacity to supply their defects,” which makes them ready pupils (“An Appendix” 213). This observation also demonstrates a countercultural perception of the deaf because it praises an innate determination and dutifulness stimulated by hearing loss rather than identifying it simply as a manifestation of sinfulness. Of course, since Holder only taught one deaf pupil, this is a big
assumption. To facilitate deaf pupils in speech, Holder argues that instructors should begin by teaching sounds that are most readily discernable by the eye, including “Labial, Labiodental, Linguadental, and Gingival” consonants, because of the noticeable movement of the tongue, lips, and teeth (“An Appendix” 214). From there, he details his suggested order of instruction in terms of consonants and eventually vowels, which he prescribes as the most difficult phonemes for the deaf to understand and recreate. In all, Holder’s pedagogy is largely characterized by a dependence upon the written alphabet, kinesthetic demonstration, and positive reinforcement.

Considering Bulwer’s own theory hinged fundamentally upon the high estimation of natural signing as a language in its own right, Holder’s general disregard of natural signing is all the more pronounced. Holder’s entire work elevates speech as he explores his own theories of phonetics; thus, only after he has described how to go about teaching the deaf to speak, does Holder mention signing. “Having thus made him learn the Alphabet and the [written] Characters of it,” says Holder, “next (or together with the other) teach him an Alphabet upon his fingers, or several parts of his hand, by placing the Letters there, which you may devise at pleasure” (emphasis mine, “An Appendix” 219). Holder’s last phrase, which I have italicized, serves as a proof of the non-universality of signing in the early modern era; at the time, manual alphabets and speech signs replacing parts of speech were largely dependent upon the preference of the user and might vary immensely from user to user.

29 One should also note that the implications of Holder’s and other early modern oralist approaches would be problematic and certainly offensive for most individuals who consider themselves a part of the Deaf Community now. Deaf Culture is distinguished by three characteristics: partial or profound hearing loss, communication primarily through ASL, and personal identification with the Deaf community. Those in Deaf Culture would certainly consider signed ASL as their primary language and see their ability to converse in spite of hearing loss as a testament to “different ability” rather than “Dis-ability.” According to Beth Sonnenstrahl Benedict, individuals who identify with Deaf Culture do not consider deafness a disability, but value the heightened “personal expression [that] a spatial and visual language [like ASL lends] that does not require the use of sound and [rather] emphasizes hands, faces, bodies and eyes” (2). In the early modern era, however, their speech-centric culture (even more pronounced and less accepting of alternative forms of communication than what we see in modern-day practice) perhaps may have prompted some deaf individuals to consider speech acquisition as a “Necessity,” as Holder asserts.
For Holder the manual alphabet, if utilized at all by the instructor, was meant to be a final resort for clarification as well as a means by which one could “gratify the Curiosity of others, who shall desire to hear him [the deaf pupil] speak” (“An Appendix” 219). This kind of spectacle, which had occurred in Spain with Don Luís, would give the instructor the opportunity, as Holder specifically writes, to “surpriz[e] those with admiration, who shall hear the Deaf person pronounce whatsoever they…shall desire, without your seeming at all to guide him with your Eye or Mouth, otherwise than by beckoning to him to speak, whilst you secretly describe it with your fingers” (“An Appendix” 219). Holder verified in his later 1678 publication, “Supplement to the Philosophical Transactions of July, 1670, with some Reflexions on Dr. John Wallis, His Letter There Inserted,” that Popham’s performances for others was not an uncommon occurrence. He writes that Popham had performed speech for “many who resorted to Bletchington, to see and hear [him]” in the year or so that Holder instructed him (“Supplement” 234). Finally, Holder’s appendix ends with his recounting of one of the experiments he conducted to discover the extent of Popham’s hearing loss. Holder describes that he would beat a drum near Popham’s ears, which he argued, caused vibrations and tension in the “Tympanum” of his ear and allowed him to hear people speak – but only when the drum was beating (“An Appendix” 222). Thus ends Holder’s description of how to teach the deaf to speak; after Popham, Holder did not undertake to teach another pupil with hearing loss, and his only contribution to the dialogue concerning deaf pedagogy was to accuse Wallis as an upstart who was attempting to steal all of Holder’s glory and achievements with Popham’s speech acquisition.

In contrast to William Holder, Dr. John Wallis taught multiple deaf pupils, including Alexander Popham. “A true polymath,” John Wallis (1616-1703), “worked as a mathematician, natural scientist, theologian and clergyman, grammarian, logician, cryptoanalyst, keeper of the archives of the University of Oxford, and editor of ancient texts on music, mathematics, and
astronomy, among other thing” (Teaching Language 73). He was “one of the original Fellows of the Royal Society” (Scott np). In the letters that Wallis exchanged with Boyle, Wallis attempted to distinguish his instruction of the deaf from other attempts; he claimed that his primary objective was not only to teach Whaley how to speak but more importantly to help Whaley understand English in both writing and speaking. This distinction was reiterated rather derogatively in Wallis’s later criticism of Holder’s failed attempts to instruct Popham. Two years after Holder had stopped his instruction of Popham, Popham’s parents hired Wallis to become his teacher because it was clear that Popham had “forgotten all the instructions he had learnt from Dr. Holder, much to the dismay of his family” (Alexander Popham’s Notebook 16). This fact is confirmed in Wallis’ own account of the event: “When Mr. Popham came to me, in the year 1662…he had so perfectly forgot (if at all taught [by Holder]) that I found him not able to pronounce one word or syllable (“A Defence of the Royal Society” 247). Wallis’ first published letter concerned his instruction of Daniel Whaley, the deaf son of the major of Northampton (Teaching Language 223). The second published letter also included a description of his instruction of Popham with a postscript praising his successful instruction of both students, attributed to the editor of Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society Henry Oldenburg but later admitted by Wallis to have been written by himself. It was the postscript that served to aggravate Holder because in it, Wallis intentionally disregarded Holder’s early role in Popham’s language acquisition, which Holder interpreted as Wallis’ means to lay claim to all of Popham’s progress in the acquisition and pronunciation of English.

30 Astoundingly, Wallis claims in his first letter to Boyle in December of 1661 that within a fortnight of teaching Daniel Whaley, Whaley “hath already learned many words, and somewhat of the Syntax. And, as to speech, hath pronounced all the sounds of our language” – a feat that seems to have taken many months for Holder (“First Letter” 207). Within three months, Wallis also apparently brought Whaley to a meeting of the Royal Society and had him demonstrate his grasp of spoken English (Teaching Language 76).
In both of his letters, Wallis emphasizes the distinction between teaching the deaf to parrot speech through mimicry via lip-reading and teaching them to truly comprehend language. Holder’s published appendix emphasized simply the acquisition of speech, but Wallis hoped to differentiate his own methods of teaching the deaf through this distinction:

The Task consists of Two very different parts; each of which doth render the other more difficult. For, beside that which appears upon the first view, To teach a person who cannot Hear, to Pronounce the Sounds of Words: There is that other, of teaching him to Understand a Language, and know the signification of those words, whether spoken or written, whereby he may both express his own sense, and understand the Thoughts of others: without which latter, that former were only to speak like a Parrot; or to write like a Scrivener, who understanding no language but English, transcribes a piece of Latin, Welsh, or Irish; or like a Printer of Greek or Arabick, who knows neither the sound nor signification of what he printeth. (“Second Letter to Boyle” 225)

Because of this, there are understandable variations between Holder’s and Wallis’ instructions for teaching the deaf. Cram and Maat articulate those differences as follows: “whereas Holder’s account goes into great detail about how to teach a deaf person to speak, while being extremely brief on grammar and meaning, Wallis’s description of how to teach speech is short and general, but is lengthy and detailed on teaching word meaning and grammar” (Teaching Language 77). In this way, Holder’s works are marked by a focus on teaching pronunciation of a language while Wallis emphasizes teaching understanding of a language. After publishing multiple letters wherein he described his successes in teaching language to the deaf, in 1662, Wallis brought Whaley to the “royal court at Whitehall, to demonstrate the result of his teaching” (Teaching Language 76). Although the historical record indicates that Holder was in fact the first person to attempt to teach the deaf to speak in England, it was Wallis who began to accumulate acclaim for his later similar successes. In large part, Wallis’ celebrity as a successful educator of the deaf became the inciting event that prompted the notorious dispute between Holder and Wallis.
Perhaps one of the reasons that interest in educating the deaf gained so much momentum in seventeenth-century England was the publicized dispute between Holder and Wallis, which garnered attention regarding the topic itself. Wallis published letters to Boyle in 1661 and 1662, and the afterward in his second letter (purportedly written by Oldenburg but in fact penned by Wallis) that praised his successful teaching of both Whaley and Popham. This infuriated Holder, who claimed that Wallis had ignored his own contributions to Popham’s education.31 Whereas Holder criticized Wallis for lack of credit and for egocentrically writing his own positive reviews, Wallis’ retorts largely posited that Holder’s methods had been ineffective while his own had proven long lasting.32 The silencing of Holder’s accusations was so final that Wallis’ “A Defence” never received a public reply from Holder. Cram and Maat do note, however, “Holder returned, almost parenthetically, to his own teaching of Popham in a treatise published in 1694, in which he alludes to the dispute with Wallis” (Teaching Language 115). Holder’s and Wallis’ public dispute undoubtedly brought attention to the theme of educating the deaf; at the same time, the spotlight had moved from particulars of the topic itself to a public grappling over claiming the title of the first teacher of the deaf in England.

The last theorist this project addresses is the Scottish theorist, George Dalgarno, whose published work Didascalocophus or The deaf and dumb mans tutor, appeared in England in 1680, two years after the publicized dispute of Holder and Wallis.33 Dalgarno’s treatise begins with the same...

31 For further reference, a detailed account of the dispute is recorded in Teaching Language to a Boy Born Deaf.

32 Here, Wallis insinuates his own lasting success with Popham’s language comprehension and elsewhere blatantly claims it; however, it should be noted that after both Holder and Wallis concluded their instruction of Alexander Popham roughly from 1659 to 1663, neither of them appeared to have kept in contact with him. Therefore, both men made broad assumptions regarding the lasting influence of their instruction with Popham.

33 Cram and Maat note that Dalgarno “bluntly ignores all previous literature on the subject” as it declares in its title page that both tracts were “the first (for what the author knows) that have been published upon either
foundation of deaf educability as every other seventeenth-century theorist or practitioner of deaf education, taking for granted an assumption that would have been denied absolutely not fifty years before. Asserting the capability of attaining “an equal degree of knowledge…by the Eye,” Dalgarno states that “All signs, both vocal and written, are equally arbitrary and ex instituto. Neither is there any reason in Nature, why the mind should more easily apprehend, the images of things impress upon Sounds, than upon Characters; when there is nothing either natural, or Symbolical, in the one or the other” (Didascalocophus 299). Furthermore, Dalgarno provides seven defenses in his first chapter to prove how “Deaf people are equal, in the faculties of apprehension, and memory, not only to the Blind; but even to those that have all their senses” (Didascalocophus 302).

Dalgarno’s instructions for teaching the deaf align for the most part with Wallis’ own brief descriptions; for this and other reasons, Cram and Maat assert that Dalgarno’s “treatise bears a close affinity to the views that Wallis expresses…so much so that one could think of Didascalocophus as containing an elaborate explanation and validation of important aspects of Wallis’ s approach to deaf education” (Teaching Language 43). However, they also state that it is entirely possible, given Dalgarno’s characteristic independent thinking, that “some of [Dalgarno’s statements] may have [been] suggested to Wallis rather than vice versa” (Cram and Maat, Teaching Language 43). In addition to its resemblance to Wallis’ pedagogy, Dalgarno’s work also aligns with Bulwer’s Philocophus. As Cram and Maat note, the title itself seems to pay homage to Bulwer’s surtitle for Philocophus. Beyond this, Dalgarno’s argument is comparable to Bulwer’s assertions in Philocophus, where he praises signing as a legitimate and even preferable form of communication. In Didascalocophus, Dalgarno...
advise teachers and specifically “mothers” to begin instruction for their “deaf child in Typology, or Dactylology” rather than attempting to teach writing or reading first (Didascalocophus 302). Dalgarno walks through his contemplation of the matter by stating that his first assumption was that teaching writing would be preferable to “Typology, or Dactylology,” for “writing is permanent, and therefore gives the young Scholar time to contemplate, and so makes the deeper impression: whereas, pointing to the fingers is transient, and gone before it can be apprehended” (Didascalocophus 302). “Upon further consideration,” Dalgarno states that “the other way [learning manual signing is] much more expedient” and that “transient motions, if often repeated, make as great an impression upon the memory, as fixt and immovable objects” (Didascalocophus 303). However, it should be noted that Dalgarno disagrees with Bulwer in his own comprehension of what natural signing should entail. Dalgarno suggests that one should “begin with Words most simple and easy...[therefore] chuse short words; for all letters are equally easy,” and in this way, conversations composed of shorter words will be easier to spell, and the conversation will not be so delayed (Didascalocophus 303). Whereas Bulwer was apparently aware that deaf persons invented singular physical signs to stand in for full words, Dalgarno describes signed conversation as consisting entirely of manually spelled-out words, as if one were reading another’s hands like a book.

Despite his misunderstanding of the nature of natural signing, Dalgarno’s elevation of signing above speech or writing as an initial inroad to educating the deaf is profound in its similarly uncommon placement of signing as an integral tool for language acquisition. However, Dalgarno’s estimation of natural signing only extends this far – perhaps because of his fundamental misunderstanding of its capacities – for Dalgarno later asserts that he finds future communication for the deaf via both “an Alphabet upon the fingers” and speech as “equally useless” to them: “As to any direct tendency of improving either of them with knowledge, or dispatch of business and
converse in vita communi, I judge them both equally useless, or at least of no very great use; because I think scarce attainable to that degree of perfection [that reading and writing afford], as to be ready for use upon all occasions” (Didascalocophus 309). While Dalgarno was most likely influenced by both Bulwer and Wallis, despite his avowal to the contrary, Dalgarno deviated from both Bulwer and Wallis in important ways. Whereas Bulwer and Wallis both ultimately arrive at the conclusion that the acquisition of speech is necessary for the deaf, Dalgarno elevates the ability to read and write as the more imperative disciplines to teach. The best method for the deaf to succeed in daily life, according to Dalgarno, was to teach the deaf individual to read and write fluently and have him carry around a “Tabula deletiles” upon which he can make his mind known to others (Didascalocophus 316).

The Obstacles and Innovations in Early Modern Deaf Education

As previously discussed through example, the successful education of the deaf in the early modern era offers early modern scholars with proof positive of an ideological shift in disability perception. Religious multiplicity, which first allowed for heterodox depictions of the disabled in seventeenth-century poetry and prose, eventually gave way to an outright rejection and concrete repudiation of historical stereotypes regarding the deaf and their capacity to learn. Despite this monumental shift, early modern deaf instruction bore its own intrinsic detriments: 1) a conventional speech-centric ideology which prioritized speech acquisition over the development of natural signing, and 2) the sensationalizing of the speaking deaf, which rendered them curiosities and ironically undercut their sociopolitical and intellectual competency. Despite drawbacks in early modern deaf education, the exploration of deafness and the development of linguistics and phonetics by seventeenth-century natural philosophers also resulted in a number of positive impacts. Firstly, teaching the deaf written and spoken English ultimately invalidated the historical assumption that the deaf were uneducable and ignorant. Secondly, though it was often marked by dissension and
intellectual plagiarism, the seventeenth-century interest, experimentation, and publication record regarding how to teach the deaf served as the first sustained and documented practice of its kind. This origin for deaf instruction contributed to the trajectory of a humanizing narrative for the disabled by attributing cognitive capacity to the deaf. For the seventeenth-century deaf, the development of deaf education promised advancements in opportunities for the hearing impaired, both legally and religiously. Finally, the developments in education for the deaf, brought about primarily by a metamorphosis in the attitude toward cognitive ability in the impaired, also arguably impacted the movement toward public access to educational accommodation.

Conventional practices in the speech-centric ideology of early modern Spain and England prioritized spoken language over natural signing. The elevation and prioritizing of spoken language in the early modern era is apparent in all of the texts theorizing the nature and practice of deaf education — a fact that Jennifer L. Nelson and Bradley S. Berens discuss in their article, “Spoken Daggers, Deaf Ears, and Silent Mouths.” As previously stated, the popular approach to deaf education in the era was “oralist” as society privileged spoken language over manual language. Both Wallis’ and Holder’s methodology demonstrates this “oralist” mentality. They both considered their teaching of English speech to their prospective students as an initial acquisition of a “first language.” John Wallis specifically states that in teaching Daniel Whaley English, he was teaching him his “first language”; 34 although admittedly, Wallis does hedge in his later 1698 letter to Thomas Beverley “Which way (of signifying their mind by Signes) Deaf persons are often very good at. And we must endeavor to learn Their language (if I may so call it) in order to teach them Ours: By shewing, what

34 Though Wallis avowed to successfully teaching Daniel Whaley his “first language” – articulated English – Whaley was known to have already been able to communicate via signed gestures. However, because the forced acquisition of speech and writing simultaneously accompanied the rejection of natural signing as a legitimate means of communication for the deaf, the ability to sign was ultimately ignored in favor of speech acquisition and writing.
Words answer to their Signes” (288). This admission, however, is marked by hesitation and is then followed by a parenthetical apology for calling sign language a “language” (because of a lack of a better descriptive word). Similarly, Holder’s brief education of Popham is construed as an attempt to teach him a first language, implying he had had none previously. Both of these approaches are so strictly “oralist” that they disregard the potential of sign language to be a language, even as both Wallis and Holder define “language” as “a Connexion of the best Signes for Communication” (emphasis mine, “An Appendix” 214).

Though on the one hand the oralist perspective elevated speech over natural signing in terms of communication, on the other, the acquisition of speech for the deaf demonstrated irrefutable proof of deaf cognitive capacity and furthermore functioned as a means by which the deaf could be granted the legal and religious rights previously denied to them. The majority of seventeenth-century pedagogues and theorists do not explicitly express social justice for the deaf as their motive for deaf instruction – for instance, neither Holder nor Wallis address this as a concern – however, the acquisition of speech and writing inevitably resulted in just that. Prior to the early modern era, “The social, religious, and legal handicaps of the deaf complicated their lives. They were unable to inherit land or own property, receive an education, or acquire the salvation of the Church. The early Christian Church made no attempt to include the deaf as part of their community of believers…Those who could not hear were barred from Communion because they could not confess aloud” (Daniels 3-4). Writing in the mid-seventeenth century, Bulwer incorporated passionate descriptions of the abuses that the deaf face legally and societally: in addition to being considered no more intelligent or rational than a madman or child, Bulwer writes, “[The deaf] cannot make his last Will and Testament [nor] cannot appoint Executors…If a man be dumbe and deafe by nature, so that he can neither write nor speake, he cannot make his Testament” (Philosophus
As Elizabeth Bearden writes in “Before Normal, There Was Natural,” “[Bulwer’s] contribution to Deaf education in Philocophus, theoretical as it is, naturalizes Deafness [rather than describing it as anomalous] and what Bulwer views as its advantages, places visual and oral communication on a continuum, and values sign language while recognizing society’s speech bias and the detrimental ramifications it has for the lives of Deaf people” (39). Bulwer’s Philocophus demonstrates his understanding that the acquisition of spoken language would give the deaf more sociopolitical agency in the world: “but if these defects [illiteracy and muteness] be severed, that hee can either write or speake, he may make his Will, and it is of force…[because] some say that in making a last Will, there is neede of an articulate voyce, and that signes will not suffice” (Philocophus 104-105). In this way, Bulwer’s oralist objective is ostensibly prompted by his concern for inclusion of the deaf into larger society. The naturalizing of deaf individuals in this work is incredibly important to acknowledge because in an era that valued natural law and used it to “justify colonization, enslavement, and the prevention of disabled people from exercising legal rights” (Bulwer qtd. in Bearden 40), Bulwer assimilates the deaf (and to an extent the blind) as another proof of the biodiversity of humanity. Bulwer’s goal to “bring Deaf people into a ‘neerer incorporation of society and communion with us’” is an admirable ambition indeed (Bulwer qtd. in Bearden 40). As relayed in Teaching Language to a Boy Born Deaf, Anton Deusing’s approach to teaching the deaf bore similarities to the sociopolitical objectives expressed by Bulwer: “Deusing’s aim was in fact to establish that the mental capacities of deaf people are equal to those of the hearing, and in particular,”

35 What Bulwer’s and also Deusing’s texts include (that Holder’s, Wallis’, and Dalgarno’s seem to lack) is the profound acknowledgement of natural signing as a language. Within the predominant methodology was a rejection of natural signing as a legitimate language system – reducing it to a “stepping-stone,” if I may use the phraseology of Warring Wilkinson (178), to aid in the acquisition of spoken language. Thus, Bulwer’s and Deusing’s promotions of natural signing as a language in itself were quite radical even among the most liberal early modern philosophers.

36 Regardless of this ultimate aim, Bulwer specifically and explicitly praises the ingenuity of sign language and recognizes it as a legitimate language; he positions deafness as an overwhelming positive skill and asset.
that they are capable of acquiring spiritual knowledge, and hence are eligible for salvation” (39). Though of course Deusing was writing for his own Dutch society, the translation and republication of the tract in England under the pseudonym “George Sibscota” also circulated the validation of salvation for the deaf in England. Of course, whereas Deusing seemed to argue that the deaf be allowed participation in the sacraments using signing, the trend of speech acquisition in England would have most likely resulted in admittance to the Protestant Church through either a written or voiced confirmation of faith.

The second detriment of early modern deaf pedagogy was that early modern aristocrats and commoners more often treated it as curious entertainment instead of respecting language acquisition by the deaf as an incredible feat worthy of admiration. The acquisition of speech and writing ironically was meant to enable the active agency of the deaf in legal and religious matters, but because the acquisition of speech by the deaf was a source of amusement which reduced the hearing impaired to spectacles of entertainment for curious aristocrats, the treatment of the speaking deaf as peculiar oddities in fact negated their ability to function as viable members of society. In the cases of Don Luís de Velasco, Daniel Whaley, and Alexander Popham, all three deaf individuals were taught to mimic speech as best they could and then forced to perform their achievements for curious spectators. In bringing their students before aristocratic and elite audiences, instructors could advertise their achievements; through this method Carrión was able to procure future paid and enviable positions, such as being hired as the secretary to King Phillip IV of Spain “with the sole duty of teaching Prince Emmanuel who was [King Phillip IV’s] nephew” (Chaves and Soler 243). Furthermore, Wallis’ achievements were advertised through Whaley’s court performance for Charles II, and this spectacle was later circulated in published accounts, which further garnered Wallis’ celebrity and procured his future employment as an instructor for Popham. While the exhibition of
the speaking deaf held its advantages in terms of publicizing educator’s achievements, the advantages for the nobility who hosted such exhibitions are much different. The largest draw for allowing the exhibition of the speaking deaf in their courts was that nobles could entertain their subjects with new curiosities, and it seemed to create just that effect, for the circulation of such marvels occurred in a wide range of historical records.

The exhibition of the speaking deaf in early modern Europe aligns with Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s observations of the historical freak show: “Freak discourse structured cultural ritual that seized upon any deviation from the typical…to produce a human spectacle whose every somatic feature was laden with significance before the gaping spectator” (5). These spectacles would serve the cultural purpose of reinforcing the “normalcy” of onlookers through the exaggeration of difference. In Bulwer’s Philoepbus, he reiterates that the acquisition of speech by the Don Luís (first described by Digby) was first an event that was ridiculed before it was later marveled at: “For which attempt [to speak] at first he was laughed at, yet after some yeares he was looked upon as if he had wrought a miracle” (138). Again, to reiterate, though the Catholic mode of supernatural cure was no longer recognized in Protestant England, the successful education of the deaf – to the point that they could mimic speech – was considered just as miraculous, given the predominant assumption that the deaf were incapable of knowledge, wisdom, or learning. Despite the possible humiliation that might have accompanied the public spectacle of the speaking deaf, the very nature of the spectacle proved to verify their capacity for rationality and language. Therefore, it could be argued that the sensationalizing of the speaking deaf also proved to propel the seventeenth-century fixation on the nature of deafness, phonetics, and the education of the deaf. In almost every early publication on instructing the deaf, theorists referred to the performance of Don Luís before the Spanish court
recorded by Kenelm Digby, whether it be to veil the account with their own skepticism or to use
the account as validation for the pursuit of deaf instruction.

Both the demonstrations of the speaking deaf in England as well as the dramatic published
dispute of Wallis and Holder furthered the interest in deaf pedagogy and spread, through other
publicized accounts and word of mouth, the successes of phoneticians and deaf educators. The
publication of various manuals for teaching the deaf carried the implicit negation of the broader
cultural assumption – which Bulwer had referred to over twenty years prior – that the deaf were
uneducable and efforts in the way of teaching them would always prove fruitless. For example,
Hakewill had with utmost certainty pronounced this false theory regarding deaf uneducability fifty
years prior in his *Vanitie of the Eye*. However, within a generation, natural philosophers and phonetic
theorists began to discount the very foundation of that false belief through their own successful
experimentation with language acquisition. Within twenty years of Bulwer’s *Philosophus*, several
events occurred to spur the reversal of the societal stigma that considered the deaf as equivalent to
the insane. Firstly, the circulation of successful reports of Spanish education of the deaf began to be
publicized in England and sparked intrigue in English society. Secondly, preliminary experiments of
the same began in England between 1659-1663 with deaf individuals like Daniel Whaley and
Alexander Popham who demonstrated their grasp of spoken English in front of the Royal Society,
the royal court, and curious (but most likely upper class) crowds. These demonstrations discounted
the previously prevailing assumption that it was impossible to teach the deaf anything, let alone
language. Finally, developments in phonetic theory and the new scientific process began to pave the
way for natural scientists – such as Holder, Wallis, and Dalgarno – to undertake the challenge of
teaching language and literacy to the deaf. Having proved its possibility, England experienced an
explosion of interest in deaf education in the mid- to late-seventeenth century that continued to
grow in the centuries to come.

The popularity in this area of interest propelled future accomplishments in deaf education, such as in the instruction of Henry Baker (1698-1774), who was “arguably the first fully professional and full-time teacher of the deaf in Britain” (Teaching Language 129). Eventually, the numerous accounts of successful language acquisition of the deaf resulted in the institutionalizing of deaf education, when in 1760 Edinburgh, Thomas Braidwood founded the first deaf school. However, the same secrecy that had characterized the instruction of Carrión also became part and parcel of later seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century institutionalized deaf education. It was not until after Braidwood established his own school for the deaf that the notion of unrestricted access to deaf education became a possibility: “Although Baker was well established as a teacher of the deaf, with a broad clientele of pupils, his activities remained essentially a personal and private enterprise. By contrast, the School for the Deaf which was established by Thomas Braidwood in Edinburgh in 1760 had the status of a charitable institution, and this marks a major turning point in the provision of education for the Deaf more generally” (Teaching Language 131). Francis Green, whose son Charles received instruction at Braidwood’s school in the early 1780s before his tragic death by drowning in 1787, expressed amazement at his son’s acquisition of language but also later revealed his frustration at the secrecy and exclusivity inherent in Braidwood’s model of education:

It exceeds the power of words to convey any idea of the sensations experienced at this interview [visiting his son]. The child, ambitious to manifest his acquisition, eagerly advanced, and addressed me, with a distinct salutation of speech. He also made several enquiries in short sentences. I then delivered him a letter from his sister (couched in the simplest terms) which he read so as to be understood; he accompanied many of the words, as he pronounced them with proper gestures, significative of their meaning, such as in the sentence, ‘write a letter by papa’: on uttering the first word, he described the action of writing, by the motion of his right-hand; the second by tapping the letter he held; the third by pointing to me.” (original emphasis, qtd. in Teaching Language 134).
Again, though Green demonstrated his amazement at the accomplishments of Charles, under Braidwood’s tutelage, Green later criticized the secrecy surrounding the methodology and practice of deaf education, which he witnessed from his Uncle (Braidwood) and that had also been implemented in Henry Baker’s instruction of the deaf. According to Cram and Maat, Green grew increasingly “aware of the large number of deaf-mute children for whom similar training was inaccessible for reasons of poverty,” and in order to combat this inaccessibility, Green undertook a personal study of deaf pedagogy and then “began to campaign for the expansion and proper funding of deaf instruction…[in his 1783 Vox oculis subjecta, Green] issued a formal call for support in establishing deaf education for all in need of it, and in particular for the indigent who lacked the financial means to pay for their instruction” (Teaching Language 134-135). Therefore, though the sensationalizing of the speaking deaf carried its own intrinsic ethical dilemmas, it ultimately sparked an explosion of interest concerning the nature of deafness and the education of the deaf as well as arguably influenced the popularizing of more humanistic representations of the deaf in seventeenth-century literature.

Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have demonstrated the ways in which the first iteration of a reformed religious model of disabilities ultimately underwent its own transformations in the seventeenth century as religious interpretations became more variable among individualized sects. The dam, which had at first was able to largely contain nonnormative theological positions, gave way under the pressure of religious multiplicity. These religious differences made for skepticism, which led to a questioning of the assumptions regarding the disabled that had been upheld historically. The end result was a seventeenth-century culture characterized by religious sectarianism that ultimately embraced its own ideological shift regarding the deaf and blind. This shift was expressed explicitly in
the insatiable exploration of how one might instruct the deaf. The metamorphosis that the early modern religious model undertook from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century was inextricably linked to the societal rejection of absolute religious uniformity in favor of the seventeenth-century divergence of religious belief evident in theological sectarianism. The proclivity for rejecting uniform ways of understanding the world is evident in natural philosophers’ rejection of the age-old stigma that because the deaf could not speak and were primarily illiterate, that they were necessarily ineducable and incapable of basic intelligence. Disproving antiquated falsities through their own experimentation, pedagogues and theorists such as John Bulwer, John Wallis, William Holder, and George Dalgarno published accounts verifying that the deaf could be taught English and had demonstrated this capability through public exhibitions.

The seventeenth-century philosophical preoccupation with the education of the deaf by all accounts took the place of the medieval doctrine of charitable giving – which had been encouraged in Catholicism but largely quelled after the Reformation. Rather than responding to their sympathy with alms, many seventeenth-century theologians and natural philosophers seem to have responded instead by undertaking the education of the deaf in order to improve their quality of life. In addition to this redirection of charitable responses, the progression of deaf education relates to the pathological mindset underlying the perception of the disabled body as an opportunity for miraculous cure. The “curative” attitude that stimulated the pursuit of miraculous cure for the impaired in medieval society also influenced the seventeenth-century English interest in educating the deaf. The medieval curative practice where the debilitated would pursue miraculous healing manifested in early modern England through the pursuits of natural philosophers to “cure” muteness with language acquisition. Almost universally, deaf instruction was oralist and aimed to teach the deaf how to speak the language of the majority. The predominant oralist methodology
approached deaf education from a prescriptive mentality – i.e., the attempt to fix what was seen as an unnatural anomaly through the forced acquisition of a language unnatural to the congenital deaf – which hearkens to the now-recognizable medical model in disability studies. Regardless, the oralist pedagogy of the time granted the deaf a legal and religious capacity that had been largely denied them in their absence of literacy and speech.

The preoccupation with deaf education in the mid- and late-seventeenth century proved to bear both advantages and disadvantages for the deaf and for the future progression of deaf education. The sensationalizing of the speaking deaf, though of course objectifying deaf persons as much as validating their intellectual acumen and educability, also proved to popularize the movement. Similarly, the publicized spats of William Holder and John Wallis, as well as the recurring intellectual plagiarism that transpired among multiple early modern theorists seemingly served to dramatize and propagate the late early modern interest in deaf education. Moreover, though the influx of published theories on deaf instruction furthered the development of the field, the inundation of literature on the topic also buried some of the more humanistic narratives of the deaf.

There were undeniable and quantifiable benefits that occurred as a result of the early modern eruption of theories for educating the deaf. Perhaps the greatest benefit from the development of early modern deaf pedagogy was that it served to substantiate shifting perceptions of the world, and especially perceptions of the disabled. Whereas seventeenth-century poets and prose writers had implied a humanizing, though often abstract, narrative of the impaired in their works, the published tracts and books by seventeenth-century theorists of deaf education – such as John Bulwer, William Holder, John Wallis, Anton Deusing, and George Dalgarno – indicated the transparent reversal of a historically inherited stigma regarding the deaf and their intellectual capacity. This emerging outlook was inherently linked to the humanist focus that characterized many of the scientific, philosophical,
and creative pursuits of the early modern era. The very existence of efforts to educate the deaf necessarily meant that society was beginning to recognize that the deaf were in fact educable and had intellectual capacity. Thus, the development of deaf instruction functioned in the era as a continuation of the same humanizing tenet for the sensorily impaired witnessed in the poetry and prose discussed in Chapter Four.

Though I have addressed at the close of this project many of the concerns I see regarding the early modern nascence and development of education for the deaf, I have directed most of my attention to the positive advancements that accompanied the early modern instruction of the deaf, beginning in sixteenth-century Spain and progressing into seventeenth-century England. In contrast with scholars such as Jennifer L. Nelson and Bradley S. Berens, I do not see an acknowledgement of the advantages that came about from this initial exploration in deaf education as exaggerated idealism but rather believe that recognizing the benefits of initial education for the deaf is a valuable exercise. By doing so, we become more aware of our cultural history, can better contemplate our inherited cultural biases toward the impaired, and finally consider more deeply the importance of developing societal perceptions and educational pedagogy that positively reinforce the identity of impaired individuals as able and sufficient rather than disabled and deficient.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Over the course of five chapters, I have examined the ways that post-Reformation society adapted Christian theology from Catholicism to Protestantism, how these doctrinal negotiations impacted society’s views of the disabled, and the ways that literary depictions of the disabled both demonstrated shifts in reformed theology and consequent societal interpretations of the early modern impaired as well as reinforced those same shifts. As discussed in the Introduction, sixteenth-century society was taxed first with extricating itself from Catholic ideology before doctrinal negotiations within reformed theology became its primary concern. Because of this, my project began with a juxtaposition of medieval and early modern religious models for disability. As demonstrated, scholars studying depictions of the sensorily impaired in sixteenth-century will find striking deviations in the early modern religious model in contrast with the medieval religious model. These variations in sixteenth-century disability representation in literature had everything to do with an attempt to distinguish reformed theology and practice from Catholic practice. In particular, two of the most prominent habitual medieval religious responses elicited by the disabled poor were 1) to give alms as an act of faith that would be accounted as righteousness, and 2) to view the disabled body for its curative potential, which would be accomplished through supernatural miracle.

To discourage spontaneous acts of charitable giving, the English Poor Laws became all the more stringent, dictating the allocation of support to the “deserving” poor. It is no coincidence that sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century dramatic works began, with increasing frequency, to depict sham-disabled beggars undertaking implausible and elaborate con jobs. Just as statutes pictured beggars as lazy, opportunistic swindlers, early modern literature reinforced the same stigma.
through print and performance. The reiterations of the Poor Laws placed the dispensation of alms more firmly in the hands of the state, and the sought-after result was the distancing of reformed society from spontaneous acts of charitable giving, an act strongly associated with Catholic works-based religious justification. Furthermore, in order to discredit the validity of the Catholic Church once and for all, the miracles wrought under its banner were invalidated, and reformed clergy affirmed that no true miracles had occurred since the time of the early church. According to early modern clergymen, such as Bishop John Hooper, the age of miracles had ended; coincidentally, the medieval model’s way of understanding and depicting individuals with sensory disability had become invalid.

The two final medieval modes for interpreting disability were perpetuated into reformed ideology with minimal variation. Utilizing impairments, and those who experienced them, as literary tools – specifically metaphors – persisted into the early modern era, and has continued to persist into the modern world. Further, the tendency to understand the existence of disability as proof positive of sin and as the visitation of God’s wrath upon the sinner did not entirely vanish under reformed theology, but lingered with a difference. Medieval depictions of disabled individuals that fell under this category most often attributed isolated and individualized sin as the root of the impairment. Under reformed theology, however, society was more likely to view impairments as representative of mankind’s universal fall from grace. Humankind shared a universal state of postlapsarian depravity, even if only certain individuals experienced impairment as a result of this common fall from grace.

While sixteenth-century depictions of the disabled largely indicate a preoccupation with the theological distancing from Catholic ideology, seventeenth-century literary depictions of the blind and deaf reveal the doctrinal fissuring that occurred within the Protestant faith and resulted in the
formation of numerous independent reformed sects. As the seventeenth century progressed, members of English society, with increasing frequency, began to resist tenets of the Established Church of England in favor of more radical Protestantism. The growing number of separatist sects, with their varying religious interpretations of reformed theology, made possible the introduction of heterodox depictions and interactions with the deaf and blind in seventeenth-century society and literature. The first unorthodox explorations of disability are evident in seventeenth-century devotional and metaphysical poetry and prose works, such as in George Hakewill’s *The Vanitie of the Eye* or Thomas Traherne’s “Dumnesse” and “Silence,” which propose a humanistic elevation of deafness and blindness as potential spiritual assets that facilitate deeper connections with the divine and prevent Christians from falling prey to temptations of the senses.

The first indications of this shifting cultural ideology manifested with full force in the mid-seventeenth century interest in educating the deaf. The theoretical and pedagogical tracts of various seventeenth-century natural philosophers and theologians repudiated the historical perception of the deaf as ineducable and incapable of comprehension, let alone salvation. In contrast, the education of the deaf functioned as an ideological shift in early modern society: whereas disabled persons had been primarily perceived by society and portrayed in literature as beings whose impairments were manifestations of their sin and utilized as metaphors, in the mid-seventeenth century, poetry and prose began to depict the impaired in a new light. Suddenly, English natural philosophers began to hypothesize how the deaf could be educated, and this pedagogical interest created the means by which deaf individuals could gain access to the articles of faith and secure their own salvations. Under the medieval religious model of disabilities, the deaf and blind had appeared in literature as symbols, objects of charity or miraculous occurrence, and scapegoats for sin or wrath. However, at
the close of the early modern era, impaired individuals began to be portrayed as educable, spiritually gifted, and characterized by their linguistic ingenuity.

**The Early Modern Religious Model and its Impact in the Present Day**

Understanding and grasping the ways that early modern society interpreted disabilities through the lens of their reformed faith allows for a better understanding of current societal norms and perspectives regarding individuals who live with impairments. Two decades into the twenty-first century, many of the societal perspectives that were part and parcel of an early modern reformed worldview continue to linger in Western cultural ideology. For centuries, in the UK, some European countries, and certainly in America, our societies have been strongly impacted and shaped by the Reformation and its aftereffects. With this understanding, it should come as no surprise that the early modern religious model of disabilities provides context for the modern-day treatment of the disabled in politics, education, and society – of which I will give several examples. On the other hand, the early modern religious model of disabilities also helps to explain the first steps that Western societies took in special education.

First, the reinforcement of skepticism in early modern texts and especially drama reverberates in the present day. Depicting false disability onstage and in literature heavily dissuaded spontaneous charity because it associated the seeming-impaired with swindlers and vagabonds. More generally, casting able-bodied actors and having able-bodied characters perform disability for personal gain almost certainly contributed to a sense of skepticism regarding the authenticity of impairment. As was the convention in early modern theatrical productions, many contemporary theatrical and film production companies still hire able-bodies actors in the roles of disabled characters. However, rather than passively accepting this practice, disabled actors and disability advocates criticize the perpetuation of feigned disability onstage because such characterization
necessarily lacks the authenticity provided by the lived experience of disability and also denies impaired and talented actors valuable roles.

In addition to generally perpetuating skepticism regarding authentic impairment among the alleged disabled, the early modern association between the seeming-impaired and swindlers or vagabonds lingers in modern society via the skepticism directed toward the homeless and especially homeless impaired. A quick Internet search using the terms “disabled” and “lazy” results in numerous blogs and news reports from disabled individuals, whose first-hand accounts verify the perpetuation of this association. The sheer number of results arguing that disability and laziness are not synonymous attests itself to the existence of a discriminatory counterargument. In a letter published by The Guardian in 2014, an anonymous writer stated definitively that the UK government’s “work capability assessment (WCA) presumes that there are too many people on disability benefits because disabled people are too lazy or too comfortable living on benefits to work” (np). According to Disability Rights UK, the WCA is the assessment used in Great Britain and Northern Ireland to determine if individuals unable to work due to injury, ill health, or general disability qualify for employment and support allowance or ESA (“Who can get” np).

The response in the United States, unfortunately, is similar and perhaps harsher. Well-known American public and political figures in recent years have been arguing against disability support programs, such as the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), because they fear the existence of systemic deception among those claiming support: “a majority of people collecting Social Security disability benefits are taking advantage of the system” (Killough np). One particular statement, by Republican Senator Rand Paul prior to his bid for the 2016 presidential election, trivialized the severity of less-visible disabilities in order to argue that American tax dollars pay for primarily fraudulent disability: “What I tell people is, if you look like me and you hop out of your truck, you
shouldn’t be getting a disability check. Over half of the people on disability are either anxious or
their back hurts – join the club” (Paul qtd. in Killough np). This all-too common mentality in
Western ideology suggests pervasive fraud by individuals who file for government assistance on the
basis of disabilities that render them unable to work. Furthermore, such statements perpetuate the
same “laziness” or “ydlenes” rhetoric and ableist interpretation used in early modern billets. The
root of this stigmatization, as I argue, lies in the popularization of propagandistic depictions of
fraudulent impairments among beggars in early modern literature, drama, and pamphlets. The
purpose of depictions of false disability among the poor in the early modern era seems to have been
to dissuade spontaneous charitable giving in favor of support of the needy via taxation. The
skepticism and judgment demonstrated by Paul is not uncommon today among the able-bodied,
leading many disabled individuals to attest to a pressure they feel to “perform” society’s version of
their disability. One such personal experience is described by Tobin Siebers in “Disability as
Masquerade”:

In December 1999, I had an altercation at the San Francisco airport with a gatekeeper for
Northwest Airlines, who demanded that I use a wheelchair if I wanted to claim the early-
boarding option. He did not want to accept that I was disabled unless my status was validated by a highly
visible prop like a wheelchair. In the years since I have begun to feel the effects of postpolio, my
practice has been to board airplanes immediately after the first-class passengers so that I do
not have to navigate crowded aisles on wobbly legs. I answered the gatekeeper that I would
be in a wheelchair soon enough, but that it was my decision, not his, when I began to use
one. He eventually let me board and then chased after me on an afterthought to apologize.
The incident was trivial in many ways, but I have now adopted the habit of exaggerating my limp whenever I
board planes. My exaggeration is not always sufficient to render my disability visible—gatekeepers still
question me on occasion—but I continue to use the strategy, despite the fact that it fills me
with a sense of anxiety and bad faith, emotions that resonate with previous experiences in
which doctors and nurses have accused me of false complaints, oversensitivity, and
malingering. (emphasis mine, 1)

Despite the relative strides made in disability representation and support over hundreds of years, the
derogatory and hyperbolic assumption that disabled people are lazy, or falsifying their impairments,
continues with its toxic ramifications into present-day.
The oralist or pathological educational perspective of the deaf, as described in Chapter Five, remains a common societal trend. Just as Deaf education in the seventeenth-century largely stifled “natural signing” in an effort to teach the Deaf to lip-read and pronounce a language that was not their own, the contemporary Deaf community still struggles against this “oralist” approach to language acquisition that devalues ASL and other signed languages as legitimate linguistic systems. This manifests in contemporary debates and criticisms regarding cochlear implants and congenitally deaf children. Many parents of deaf or hearing-impaired children opt for surgically implanting cochlear devices in their children’s inner ears. According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), cochlear implants are distinguished from hearing aids because whereas hearing aids amplify sounds like a microphone for those whose hearing is impaired but still at least minimally functional, cochlear devices “bypass damaged portions of the ear and directly stimulate the auditory nerve” (np). For this reason, cochlear devices are ideal for individuals who are born congenitally deaf, although the device itself does not cure deafness. Instead, cochlear implants “work by converting sounds into electrical signals, which are sent to the nerves surrounding the cochlea and interpreted by the brain as sound” (Zych np). The implant “allows many people to recognize warning signals, understand other sounds in the environment, and understand speech in person or over the telephone” (“Cochlear Implants” np). However, a Deaf person with a cochlear implant is not actually hearing anything; rather, the device is sending electrical impulses.

Cochlear devices and the procedure to implant them were first introduced in the 1980s and were met with polarized responses. Though many certainly considered the devices as revolutionary and beneficial to deaf or hearing-impaired individuals, a large number of individuals in the Deaf community greeted the scientific advancement with contempt. According to Lydia Denworth,
whose son received cochlear implants before the age of three, cochlear implants were greeted at their development with extreme disapproval and were even labeled as “child abuse” when implanted in children (Denworth np). In the 1980s, cochlear implants were more often used to treat adults; it was not until the year 2000 that cochlear implants were “FD-approved for use in eligible children beginning at 12 months of age” (“Cochlear Implants” np). It is at this young age that cochlear implants are considered ideal by medical and linguistic experts because it gives children the opportunity for more advanced acquisition of speech: “Research has shown that when these children receive a cochlear implant followed by intensive therapy before they are 18 months old, they are better able to hear, comprehend sound and music, and speak than their peers who receive implants when they are older” (“Cochlear Implants”). However, these implants are not always greeted with acceptance and approval among members of the Deaf community.

For those within the Hearing community, surgically implanting cochlear devices in children might seem the most logical response to congenital deafness. However, cochlear implantation continues to be interpreted by some individuals in the Deaf community as “an act of violence” (@Hayxsmith, “Even more importantly”) that sends the message that “deafness is an evil that must be overcome and vanquished” (@Hayxsmith, “Can you folks”). Tying directly back to the religious interpretation of impairments as manifested signs of divine wrath or proof of sinfulness in the lives of those who live with impairments, this pathological response continues to subsist today. Furthermore, even as early modern pedagogues sought to cure the congenital deaf with the acquisition of English – the language of the majority – contemporary efforts are attempting to “cure” the Deaf and Blind with technology.

When it concerns children, many Deaf individuals frown at cochlear implantation because the surgery often results in the exclusion of deaf children from the Deaf community by precluding
the acquisition and use of sign language. In Denworth’s own experience, for example, her son Alex lost nearly all the sign language he had acquired in childhood within a year of receiving his cochlear implant. Upon hiring a fully-deaf ASL instructor to tutor Alex, Denworth discovered that her son now “behaved like a thoroughly hearing child” and had lost the capacity for the “visual attention…required in order to sign” (np). In practical terms, giving cochlear implants to young children might ultimately deny them the possibility of identifying as Deaf in Deaf Culture and can create the potential for language barriers in both spoken English and signed ASL, placing them on the fringe of both societies.

Today, though offensive to some Deaf individuals, cochlear implants have become more commonly accepted. However, another scientific development more recently circulated in popular and scientific news has prompted more widespread condemnation and alarm by members of the Deaf community. Taking the curative mindset to extreme lengths, the Russian scientist Denis Rebrikov has started “editing genes in human eggs with [the] goal of altering [the] deaf gene” (Cyranoski np). Although this scientific research is in its own embryonic stage, well-known Deaf advocates and celebrities – such as Nyle Dimarco – have denounced the procedure as “a form of cultural genocide” (@NyleDimarco, “THIS IS”). Both of these examples perpetuate the pathological perspective of disabilities, discussed periodically throughout this project, that describes the able body as something of a cultural gold standard and limits inclusive acceptance of bodies that do not fit the norm. By inviting comparisons and analogies between past and present depictions and interpretations of impairment such as those mentioned above, this study offers explanations for contemporary conduct even as it describes the religious origins of disability representation in popular culture.
Negative consequences of the developed early modern religious model of disabilities have certainly persisted into the present day; however, more beneficial side effects have also resulted from this socio-religious paradigm. Whereas the disabled were often interpreted as subhuman and often-times assumed incapable of education, reason, or religious understanding, the majority of contemporary society would more likely condemn such stereotypes as both categorically false as well as socially unacceptable perceptions of the disabled. In the United Kingdom, over twenty primary and secondary schools exist that offer services or specialized education for the Deaf, blind, and otherwise impaired (“Schools for the deaf” np). As of 2015, the United States also boasted of roughly one hundred and twenty primary and secondary schools for the Deaf and blind (“Schools and Programs for Deaf and Hard of Hearing” np). More than ever, collegiate education has become attainable for the Deaf and other disabled students through technological and structural advancements that promote accessibility, inclusion, and accommodation on every level of education. In addition to departments for student accessibility, the Washington D.C. also houses Gallaudet University – the only university in the world that offers barrier-free education for the Deaf. While theorists such as John Bulwer recognized the lack of political agency for early modern impaired individuals – such as the deaf – there is now no lack of political activism and advocacy for and by the impaired. More frequently, the question of accessibility and equity for the disabled has become an unignorable platform topic for contemporary political candidates in both the United States and abroad.

After one reads this study, it should be clear that much progress has been made in terms of inclusion and equity for the disabled and differently abled that has been made since the early modern era. More than ever, Western culture has begun to celebrate and normalize “nonnormative” bodies and identities. However, what is also clear is the work that remains to be done in eradicating all trace
of the deprecatory reformed religious stigmas of the disabled that were reactionary responses to the rejected Catholic worldview of the Middle Ages. Such responses had their place in establishing England as a Protestant nation that could claim complete independence from the Roman Catholic religion and influence; however, the negative effects of this early modern religious model (in terms of its condemnatory responses) have continued to persist unnecessarily into modern society for hundreds of years, where such perspectives have no place and often only encourage intolerant attitudes. The first step we must take in the direction of rejecting marginalizing perspectives is to recognize the origins of our Western ideologies and historically conditioned responses to the impaired; from there, we become capable of properly addressing and altering those responses. Outlining such a foundational framework is what this project has aimed to do.
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