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Founded by Leslie J. Workman

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Studies in Medievalism

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Studies in Medievalism

Bringing Elsewhere Home: *A Song of Ice and Fire*'s Ethics of Disability

Pascal J. Massie and Lauryn S. Mayer

As essay after essay in this series has reminded us, the term "neomedievalism" is too multivalent and maddeningly complex to define with any satisfaction: any attempt to create *a* definition invariably oversimplifies the concept or distorts it to fit current needs. In the case of neomedievalism, rather than attempt another iteration of an Ur-definition, Carol R. Robinson and Pamela Clements have done invaluable work in creating a field guide to understanding the characteristics of neomedievalism. In brief, we can call a text neomedieval when it does one or more of the following:

1. It is playful or ironic in nature.
2. It calls attention to its own construction, often as a work of bricolage.[1]
3. It deliberately shatters any possibility for a "sealed world" of the text.
4. It refuses the nostalgic fantasy of being able to retrieve the medieval past.
5. Its task is to create a conscious vision of an alternative universe.[2]

This last item holds the most promise as a way of reading George R. R. Martin's multi-volume *A Song of Ice and Fire* as a text concerned with particular ethical issues surrounding disability: the damage ableist discourses and narratives inflict on the disabled.

1 Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements, "Living with Neomedievalism," in *Studies in Medievalism XVIII: Defining Medievalsim(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 55–75.

2 Carol L. Robinson, "Some Basic Definitions," <http://medievalelectronicmultimedia.org/definitions.html>, accessed 8 December 2013.

In the landmark case *Arline vs. Nassau County*, Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., summarizing the need for an inclusive definition of disability, noted the problems that narratives of disability posed for the disabled: "society's accumulated myths and fears about disability and disease are as handicapping as are the physical limitations that flow from actual impairment."[3] Nancy Mairs, a well-known writer, MS sufferer, and advocate for the disabled, echoes this statement in her canonical essay "On Being a Cripple":

> In our society, anyone who deviates from the norm is expected to compensate. Like fat people, who are expected to be jolly, cripples must bear their lot meekly and cheerfully. A grumpy cripple isn't playing by the rules […] . One way or the other then, I wind up feeling like Tiny Tim, peering over the edge of the table at the Christmas Goose, waving his crutch, piping God's blessing down upon us all. Except that I don't feel like playing Tiny Tim. I'd rather play Caliban, a most scurvy monster.[4]

In describing the social expectations, fears, and fantasies surrounding the disabled, Mairs chooses her two tropes from literary icons (Charles Dickens and Shakespeare), in the process making an implicit comment on the power that widely read texts have to inform ideologies of disability. In Martin's neomedievalist series, the categories of victim and monster, "normal" and "disabled" are continually challenged and rewritten in a way that constitutes an overall critique of ableist discourse.

The most frequent representations of disability in works of fiction follow a set of assumptions that is probably shared by the majority of these fictions' consumers. They indicate or assume that:

1. Disability is a state of lack/deprivation/want. The very term suggests that disability is not only a deviation from a norm but a diminishment of personal and social identity.
2. The disabled must conform to a certain set of narrative structures and psychological expectations outside of which she becomes illegible.
3. Disability is an unfortunate state of dependence upon others. The disabled are evaluated on how much they either a) triumph, to their limited abilities, over that condition or b) gratefully acknowledge the sacrifices of the more "autonomous."

[3] *Arline vs. Nassau County* (480 U.S. 273).

[4] Nancy Mairs, "On Being a Cripple," in *Plaintext: Essays* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 37.

4. In order to keep the lines between the able and disabled body clear, disability is framed as relatively rare and exceptional (even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary).

Arguably, the second and fourth points are the most prevalent in literary representations of the disabled. Physical-disability narratives focus on the disabled body as either innately insufficient or as the visible sign of innate moral corruption (the Batman villains are the most notable modern example of this latter trope, and this pattern is made necessary by the inherent moral ambiguity of the hero). In both cases, they are marked by lack: the inability of the disabled subject to achieve his or her full potential. From admiration to pity, from disgust to curiosity, the disabled need only appear on the stage to cause a strong, and often contradictory, emotional response among the abled. In Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, the *cour des miracles* (court of miracles) constitutes a counter society of thieves, beggars, and criminals with its own rules and political organization. Populated by the crippled of all sorts (real or fake) who depend on alms to survive, the spectacle of the *cour des miracles* causes an array of emotions varying from disgust to pity to amusement when the beggar who was crippled all day long "miraculously" walks again upon his return to the cour.

In some instances, the physical disability indicates a sacrifice that allows for acquiring some abilities of a higher nature. Homer is blind, but his blindness allows him to listen to the Muses. Tiresias's blindness indicates that he has transcended the common realm of the mortals, his prophetic powers allow him to communicate with the divine. Professor X (Charles Francis Xavier) of the *X-men* corpus is a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair, but he is a scientific genius and a powerful telepath. Those disabled have transcended the usual limitations of embodiment. In the barter between the body and the mind, their physical loss is their spiritual gain. If the disabled subject is a victim, he or she is then funneled into several equally limiting narratives: "the burden," "Tiny Tim," "the cultural symbol," or "the triumph of the human spirit."

If the disability is marked as a visible sign of innate corruption, the disabled subject can either remain evil until the end (in which case the destruction of what would otherwise be a pitiable body becomes a laudable act), or she can become the subject of a "redemption narrative" (in which case her rage over her disability turns to grief/wisdom and an acceptance of the limitations of that state). As Tobin Siebers notes, disability has a symbolic function, operating as:

> a political process through which private emotions and thoughts are made compelling to the public imagination. The political cannot exist

> in the absence of such symbolism because it described the dynamic by which individuals are recognized by others and gathered together into communities.[5]

Thus, Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a hunchback, but, as Siebers notes, "his disability represents deceitfulness and lust for power, not a condition of his physical and complex embodiment."[6]

The fourth point notes also an attempt to locate disability elsewhere, and in a far more insidious manner. Its agenda is to break up disability into "acceptable" and "nonacceptable" categories. "Acceptable" disabilities are those that are most common and not coded as such: the wearing of glasses/contacts, or non-obtrusive hearing aids, the cast (indicating a temporary condition and a course toward recovery), the "invisible" use of prescriptions to regulate hormones, brain function, glands, and the like. In short, what is common/invisible is not disability and vice versa. As the cast shows, we will accept disability as long as it advertises itself as a temporary situation. No one calls the athlete in traction "disabled"; no matter how long her recovery may take, the promise of recovery itself is a guarantor of "normality."[7] The effort to keep a clear line of demarcation between "them" and "us" occurs despite the fact that a stable biomedical condition to classify a variation as impairment is regularly called into question by the existence of classification shifts.[8] Thus, homosexuality has recently been de-medicalized while shyness is now considered a medical condition. People with Parkinson's disease, Type II diabetes, emphysema, forms of dementia, schizophrenia, and HIV, among others, are typically not regarded as disabled even though their ability to perform certain daily tasks (or even most of them) can be very significantly hindered, more so, in some cases, than those who are perceived as "disabled."

5 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 48.

6 Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 48.

7 The lead case on this issue is *Sutton vs. United Airlines Inc*. Two sisters who trained as commercial pilots with 20/20 vision with corrective lenses but less than 20/20 without them were removed from selection interviews by United Airlines on the ground that they did not meet the company's vision requirement. The defendant (United Airlines) argued that the women were not disabled since their impairment was corrected through the use of technological aid. The Supreme Court (2146, *per* Sandra Day O'Connor) reasoned that the ADA restricts coverage to individuals whose impairments are not mitigated by corrective measure. See Fiona Kumari Campbell, "Legislating Disability," in *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, ed. Shelley Tremain (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 122–24.

8 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, article: "Disability: Definitions, Models, Experience," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability/>, accessed 8 December 2013.

If we take physical impairment as the only (or main) criterion of disability, the category becomes so large that it potentially encompasses everyone. The insistence on treating disability as the exceptional manifestation of the irregular betrays our tendency to dismiss the range of human variation. And we can suspect that we do so in order to protect ourselves from the recognition of our vulnerability. All these efforts to narrate, define, and patrol the realm of ability/disability speak to, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, the unavoidable conflation of disability and humanity: "[An] aspect of subject formation that disability confirms is that identity is always in transition. Disability reminds us that the body is, as Denise Riley asserts, 'an unsteady mark, scarred in its long decay.'"[9] We are born dependent, and most of us will die dependent; most of our lives are bounded by a dependence upon someone or some community. With (if we are unlucky) serious illness or (if we are lucky) simple aging, we will all be "disabled" at some time. From that standpoint, to insist on "abled/disabled" is to refuse to acknowledge one's own embodied and mortal condition. As Judith Butler notes: "In a sense, to be a body is to be given over to others, even as a body is, emphatically, 'one's own.'"[10] And the consequences are serious. On the individual level, to maintain this divide is to make oneself vulnerable to one's own narratives when disability comes, as it will. On a societal level, to insist on the importance of individualism and independence is to maintain an unsustainable fantasy in the face of an interdependent and vulnerable world.

If these fantasy realms operate by disavowing their status as fantasy, perhaps the realm of conscious fantasy may provide an antidote, or at least an alternate set of narratives. Butler, in the essay noted above, argues for fantasy's potential as a catalyst for social change:

> The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.[11]

More specifically, Jane Stemp's analysis of disability in fantasy and science fiction rightly notes the potential that medievalist literature holds for undoing the fantasies of ableism: "a motif from (medieval) history is the prevalence of disabilities, acquired through war and other hazards, which are nothing

9 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 14:3 (2002): 7.

10 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.

11 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.

remarkable."[12] But if in medievalist literature disability is, if not portrayed as the norm, at least presented as more frequent than in contemporary settings, Stemp cautions against viewing disability's "unremarkable presence" as sufficient critique unto itself:

> Fantasy is beset with traps for the writer, particularly the "magical cure," a trap that springs from their desire to "nod to the mythical, perfect archetypes" while "science fiction writers, however willing to cast a satirical eye on earlier notions of 'progress', seem reluctant to abandon the hope that a perfected medical system will yet cure all the ills of the world.[13]

The ambivalence betrays an ethical dilemma: what should be done with disability? More pointedly, what do disabled people want? Do they want a cure or do they want to be seen differently? The fantasy realm is not just a representation or distortion of reality; it has become a part of it. When a computer-generated commercial of Christopher Reeve walking appeared during the 2000 Super Bowl, some viewers assumed that Reeve had overcome paraplegia, and though the stated intention was to raise awareness and give hope, many people with congenital and acquired disabilities were not pleased. While Reeve was pushing for a cure (notably to allow stem-cell research in the US), others did not ask for a cure, but for societal change.

Even if the magical- or medical-cure trope is not present, often there is the "offer of choice" (the disabled character has a chance to become "able," an offer that if accepted, reinforces ableist fantasy, and if rejected, is usually rejected in a sacrificial gesture, leaving the disabled in the position of martyr). A third possibility, of overall ideological change, is thus missing. The disability must either be corrected by a magical act (or a technological breakthrough) or, if it is accepted, it must serve a greater good (the disabled veteran reminds us of the sacrifice she endured to defend our freedom). That one could be fully *oneself* (thus, not marked by a lack) even though one is disabled seems incomprehensible. How could one be "normal" if one is disabled? Does not the call for a societal change face a logical contradiction built in the very semantic of "normality" and "disability"? Stemp finds the cause of these limiting tropes in the escapist nature of fantasy and science fiction itself: "writers are reluctant to alter reality in the presence of disability without having the disability itself changed."[14] Her extensive survey

12 Jane Stemp, "Devices and Desires: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Disability in Literature for Young People," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 21:1 (Winter 2004): 3.

13 Stemp, "Devices and Desires," 9.

14 Stemp, "Devices and Desires," 10.

of science fiction and fantasy literature finds only rare exceptions to these tropes.

A Game of Thrones, the first volume of George R. R. Martin's enormous epic fantasy *A Song of Ice and Fire*, appeared in 1996. The sheer number of major characters that are or become disabled is unusual:[15] Bran Stark is no sooner introduced than he is pushed out of a tower, a fall that shatters his spine and his dreams of becoming a knight. Hodor, his servant, is physically powerful but unable to say anything other than his name. Tyrion Lannister was born a dwarf and is additionally mutilated during an early battle, losing his nose.[16] Varys, the eunuch, is the victim of a brutal castration. Jaime Lannister has his sword hand cut off as retribution. Arya Stark, during her apprenticeship at the temple of the Many-Faced God, faces a gamut of possible "disabilities": as punishment/education for her taking it upon herself to deal out death she is deprived of her sight, and her training promises more to come:

> We took your eyes and gave them back. Next we will take your ears, and you will walk in silence. You will give us your legs and crawl. You will be no one's daughter, no one's wife, no one's mother. Your name will be a lie, and the very face you wear will not be your own.[17]

With an epic of this scope and this many intermingled story lines, one that is still unfinished after five massive volumes, any argument about the role and purpose of a specific character is perilous. With that in mind, however, we can at least begin to discuss the effects of the *number* of disabled characters, followed by an analysis of two characters notable for their challenges to narratives of disability.

Martin is famous for shocking and horrifying his readers with swift and brutal reversals of fortune: Jaime Lannister's attempted murder of Bran, Joffrey Lannister's condemnation of Ned Stark, the notorious "Red Wedding" massacre by the Freys. These events serve their pragmatic purpose in keeping the plot unpredictable; they also highlight the vulnerability of

15 The count of the disabled grows if we expand it to consider important, but not major characters: The disfigured "Hound," Sandor Clegane, Myrcella Lannister, who loses an ear while abducted, and Davos Seaworth, whose hand is mutilated as a punishment for smuggling.

16 Martin's writing of Tyrion as noseless post-battle led to an interesting problem for the creators of the HBO series. They could not include a lack of nose in a popular and innately moral character, because that particular disability had already been coded as emblematic of evil in the *Harry Potter* series, in the figure of Voldemort. Tyrion, in the series, appears with a scar across his face instead.

17 George R. R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 837.

everybody in the refusal to spare characters usually protected from disabling violence in most fantasy series (romantic pairs, children, paragons of virtue). A brief comparison with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy should suffice: after a three-volume quest through battles, monster-filled mines, haunted marshes, caves of giant spiders, and Mordor itself, the body count for the Nine Walkers stands at one, a ludicrous number given the circumstances, and the only disabled character is Frodo, who loses a ring finger. Martin thus strips the buffer of fantasy by making his world just as arbitrary and dangerous as our own. Moreover, the variety of disabilities found in *A Song of Ice and Fire* forces the reader to confront the multifaceted nature of disability: disability as innate condition (such as Tyrion's dwarfism or Hodor's speech impediment[18]), where the character is, from birth, subject to ableist discourse; or disability as sudden loss, as in the case of Bran or Jaime, where Martin at a swoop deprives them of the ability upon which their identity hinges: climbing in Bran's case, and swordplay in Jaime's. The reader is surrounded by the disabled as if by a ring of mirrors, in which she is forced to recognize herself as a potentially disabled being or lose the experience of textual immersion altogether. Once in this position, she is able to experience the ways these characters refuse to conform to the conventional tropes surrounding disability and launch an implicit challenge to ableist normative standards.

Jaime Lannister's initial attack on the seven-year-old Bran would seem to mark him as a sociopath; as the volumes unfold, he is revealed as an example of Dantean misplaced love: his passion for his sister Cersei (and the homophone is not accidental) overrides any other ethical or emotional consideration, and as we see the cost of his infatuation with her and her casual use of that infatuation, it becomes difficult to see Jaime as an uncomplicated villain. Initially, Jaime appears first and foremost as a warrior and lover; he is truly himself when in battle or bed with Cersei. His physical appearance (tall and handsome) belies his moral character: arrogant, brutal, and ruthless. He is quite convinced that "there are no men like me, there's only me."[19] His eventual mutilation, the loss of his sword hand, reduces him

18 Hodor is potentially one of the most interesting of the disabled characters in Martin's epic. He is a physical giant of immense strength, but only responds to the speech of others by saying his own name, "Hodor," with various, situationally appropriate resonances. Martin, however, gives no clear sign that he is innately mentally impaired; the other characters infer that from his speech, as do Martin's readers. However, Hodor seems to understand language perfectly, and has the vocal ability to produce sounds, raising the question of what his choice to continually produce and reproduce his name means in a text concerned with the effects of ableist discourse and its refusal of the individual in favor of the stereotype.

19 George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 791.

to the most abject form of dependency, for he had no abilities other than his fighting skills. His desperate attempt to regain that skill with his remaining hand (and the failure of that attempt) frame him as a cripple deserving of our pity, not so much because of his physical handicap but because of his incapacity to shape another existence for himself. Disability, for Jaime, is punishment; it is a castration, the loss of his masculinity. His subsequent office as the (one-handed) Hand of the King is savagely cruel; he can no longer be a protector, and the work of the Hand (the scheming, negotiating, bargaining, and ruthless annihilation of enemies) proves to be beyond his abilities. At this point in the epic, however, Jaime is still existing in a limbo where he thinks in terms of his lost abilities; he is interesting, not because of his conformity to typical disability narratives, but because Martin has thus far refused any such consolatory tropes.

Bran and Tyrion are the most interesting of the disabled characters: the former, because of Martin's deliberate refusal of sentimentalism in the depiction of a disabled child; the latter because Tyrion, arguably the most complex and well-crafted of Martin's creations, actually points up the "crippled" and vulnerable nature of the ableist fantasy, rather than being thwarted by physical disability.

Bran's narrative fairly screams for a sticky-sweet Dickensian rendering: a jolly scamp of a seven-year-old boy, whose dreams of chivalry are cut short by a truly brutal attempted murder: upon accidentally viewing Jaime and Cersei's incestuous coupling in a high tower, Bran is picked up from the windowsill and then hurled down by Jaime, a fall that shatters his spine and leaves him in a coma for weeks. He lives and recovers, only to learn that he is paralyzed from the waist down, and can only move around with the help of Hodor. While bedridden, however, Bran discovers that he has the ability to occupy the bodies of other beings. Bran's paralysis allows him, paradoxically, to move more freely: to cross two borders, the first one, of a shamanistic nature, between humans and animals, the second of a metaphysical nature between mind and body. While comatose, his direwolf saves him from attempted murder. A three-eyed crow he encounters in a dream tells him that it will teach him how to fly. From then on, he is the winged wolf. Most often, the sight of disabled children is a disturbing one; it is a display of an injustice and causes a deep sorrow. The character of Bran, however, is the opposite of a sweetly moral Victorian victim; he initially rages against his limitations, and when he finally learns to inhabit other bodies and make them move to his will, he displays no compunction whatsoever about using these unwilling prosthetics:

> After they were gone, he slipped inside Hodor's skin and followed them. The big stable boy no longer fought him as he had the first

> time, back in the lake tower during the storm. Like a dog that has had all the fight whipped out of him, Hodor would curl up and hide whenever Bran reached out to him. His hiding place was deep inside, a pit where even Bran could not touch him. *No one wants to hurt you, Hodor*, he said silently to the child-man whose flesh he'd taken. *I just want to be strong again. I'll give it back, the way I always do.*[20]

A body is akin to a glove or a puppet; it is meant to be animated from within (the choice of the word "flesh" stresses internality and materiality) while remaining indifferent to the one who inhabits it. Because he has overcome at least in part his dependence on his own body, Bran has overcome his disability. Embodiment appears then not only as the condition of particular disabilities but as *the* disability. Yet, this freeing from the demands of the body is not a Platonic elevation toward the intelligible realm. Far from turning him into a vindicated victim, the new powers he acquires are not a compensation for his lost innocence; on the contrary, Bran becomes the abuser of the more disabled, and his apology to Hodor reeks of self-serving insincerity; Hodor has simply become a resource.

A shaman's soul is said to travel through the animal and the human world, inhabiting different bodies, at times an eagle, at times a wolf, perceiving the world with acute senses. But Bran is a shamanistic figure in yet another sense: he inhabits different personae. He is in turn a child victim, a cripple, a magical being endowed with supernatural powers, and an abuser. He should be pitied for his disability and feared for his powers. When he first appears in the saga, his childish innocence starkly contrasts with the incestuous sexual act committed before him by Jaime and his twin sister Cersei. Yet, he ends up as the abusive master of an unwilling servant. In this sense, Bran has the same moral ambiguity as most other characters in the epic – his youth does not constitute an exception. Bran becomes "normal" by his ability to escape the hero/victim dichotomy of disability fantasies and becomes simply another flawed opportunist of the epic's world.

The most prominent disabled character in *The Song of Ice and Fire* is arguably Tyrion Lannister. However, the significance of his case is not simply due to the fact that Martin grants him a prominent role in the development of the plot. His disability, dwarfism, marks him as the only major character who we know did not acquire his condition through an accident. While other characters *become* disabled, Tyrion *is* disabled; there is no time of his existence where he was otherwise than he is now. A congenital disability is more

[20] Martin, *A Dance with Dragons*, 584.

likely to constitute an identity than an acquired one. A congenital condition may not be experienced as a lack by the disabled person until it is called to their attention. Those who have always been little persons, deaf, or blind do not experience their condition as the result of a loss. It is the reaction to their appearance, one that often betrays the uneasiness of the able, that is the main factor to their identity as disabled. In our cultural imaginary, little people are freaks, social outcast, or objects of compassion.

Furthermore, dwarfism is not just a physical condition; it is a social role and a cultural metaphor.[21] It occupies an important place not only in our cultural imaginary in general but in the medieval imagery in particular. Dwarfs belong to the world of European courts where, often as jesters, they occupy an ambiguous position. They are often perceived as servants of sort; yet they are granted a license to speak their mind that would be cause of severe punishment for anyone else (servant or nobleman). Their condition grants them protection and possibly even affection, but it also exposes them to abuse, sometimes simultaneously. Isabella d'Este, the Marchesa of Mantua, set aside part of her palace for her dwarfs, and in 1710 the Tsar Peter the Great allowed a dwarf couple to spend their wedding night in his bedchambers.[22] Amusement and repulsion coincide in the figure of the dwarf. Martin, however, seems to use Tyrion more as a representation of the *Ice and Fire* world itself: an uneasy mix of Stark pessimistic idealism, Lannister cynical cunning, and Baratheon excess, Tyrion embodies the traits that lead to the downfall of each house's leaders, while his disaster-prone adventures invite a reading as a critique of the entire *Game of Thrones*.

Tyrion's disability is mitigated throughout the series: he is well-educated, and, as a Lannister, he has access to power and wealth. He also seems oddly unmoved by the disasters that surround him, and inevitably he both survives and manages to turn them to advantage: initially captured by Catelyn Stark and imprisoned, he evades execution by a "cunning plan"; captured by the mountain tribes, he manages to lead them back as Lannister mercenaries; and he survives his father's attempt to have him killed in battle, all with the same mocking insouciance. His real armor is his internalization both of ableist culture's exile of the disabled and its concomitant championing of

21 In Germanic and Scandinavian folklore, the dwarf is a type of fairy inhabiting mines and the interior of mountains.

22 As an instance of ambivalent attitude it should be noted that the Tsar's interest did not stem from humanitarian concern. Peter was fascinated by oddities and accidents of nature; he established a Kunstkamera, a cabinet of curiosities where deformed animal and human skeletons were preserved. As for Isabella, she viewed her dwarfs as she would have viewed her dogs: breeding them and giving their children as gifts to her friends.

individualism and independence: "Let them see that their words can cut you, and you'll never be free of the mockery. If they want to give you a name, take it, make it your own. Then they can't hurt you with it anymore."[23] Since his disability is congenital Tyrion rationalizes his condition by associating it with the status of a bastard. The advice he gives to Jon Snow (widely believed to be Lord Eddard Stark's bastard) and the assistance he offers to the paralyzed Bran (he designs a saddle so he can ride) stem from his sympathy for "bastards and broken things":

> Tyrion: "let me give you some advice, bastard. Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like an armor, and it can never be used to hurt you."
> Jon: "What the hell do you know about being a bastard?"
> Tyrion: "All dwarfs are bastards in their father's eyes."[24]

His dwarfism makes him an expert and he sees his task as making Jon and Bran more independent individuals – something they can achieve only when they not only accept their condition but even embrace it. Yet, the support he can provide to others comes at a price, for it means that those who accept his wisdom must recognize themselves in him: their social condition is a form of disability. Furthermore, if the bastard is a cripple of sorts, the cripple is a bastard. The repeated identification of disability and bastardy in Tyrion's case adds an oedipal depth to it: his father dislikes him not only for his deformity but also for the death of his mother during his birth. His condition is a punishment for a crime he committed simply by virtue of being born.

The development of Tyrion's character in *Song of Ice and Fire* allows Martin to broach a theme that remains one of the most taboo topics in the popular perception of disability, namely, the sexuality of/with disabled people. Disabled people are often believed to be sexually and emotionally immature; the very word "disability" entails "limitation," "diminishment"; it connotes features that are undesirable or even unattractive. As Siebers puts it, "The fusion between ability and sexuality appears to be foundational to the nature of humanity, so much so that any attempt to unfuse them is considered a threat to the human race itself."[25] (Thus, various attempts to prevent sexual encounters between disabled people have been made in the name of eugenics.[26]) But in the case of disability, as in many other instances,

23 George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), 185.
24 Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 57.
25 Siebers, "Disability Theory," 142.
26 Marsha Saxton reports that the little people community is divided on the issue of selective abortion. Most are incensed by the idea that a woman or a couple would chose to abort

sexuality heightens and crystallizes our ambivalence and contradictions. If the sexuality of disabled people is perceived as distasteful or as a threat to normalcy (as Siebers and Saxton suggest), intercourse between a disabled and an able person is also an object of fetishist fixation among the able. Amputees (acrotomorphilia) and little people in particular have "devotees." And of course, these forms of paraphilia are themselves perceived by the general public as pathological, while their psychiatric and legal classification remains to this day highly confused. Tyrion's complex sexual and emotional life must be read against this background.

Medievalist fantasies are often dominated by scenes of war and sumptuous banquets. By definition, this life of danger and excess, of violence and orgy, fits able people (particularly men) and would seem to exclude disabled people. Yet, this is Tyrion's world, and he has learned to excel in both areas. Indeed, his sexual appetite is often stressed, as he is often in the company of prostitutes and courtesans: women whose function is to provide sexual gratification without the bonds of emotional attachment. What is more, rather than reserve his sexual needs and exploits for his "private" life, he is quite explicit about them:

> Gunther: "How would you like to die, Tyrion son of Tywin?"
> Tyrion: "In my own bed, with a belly full of wine, and a maiden's mouth around my cock, at the age of eighty."[27]

However, his casual attitude with prostitutes is multifaceted. Martin casts it against an oft-repeated narrative of Tyrion's early life: his first love was for a common girl named Tysha whom he secretly married. When his father, Lord Tywin, learns of his marriage he orders Tyrion's brother, Jaime, to make him believe that the young girl was a prostitute he had hired. To punish the whore who had presumed to marry a Lannister, Tywin devises a "lesson": he forces Tyrion to watch his entire guard rape Tysha and finally has Tyrion himself do the same. Tyrion does not question his father, since he has already accepted the rhetoric that he, as a dwarf, is not capable of inspiring romantic love. This event becomes a kind of orthopedic trauma, a way for him to guard himself from any real emotional investment in others, though it is ultimately only partially successful. The later revelation from Jaime that Tysha

simply because the fetus would become dwarf; yet, "prospective parents who are carriers of the dwarfism gene, or are themselves dwarfs, who would readily welcome a dwarf child, might still elect to use the screening test to avoid the birth of a fetus identified with double dominance." M. Saxton, "Disability Rights and Selective Abortion," *The Disability Studies Reader* (2nd ed.), ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 108.

27 Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 460.

was not a whore, and it was simply a sadistic trick of his father's to prevent him from marrying out of his class, is one that almost destroys Tyrion. Not because of his father's betrayal, but because the revelation means that the narratives he took as painful, but real, are not so; the possibility for community and mutual interdependence exists. Thus, Tyrion's sexual and emotional life is inextricably intertwined with his disabled condition. Making his sexual appetite and his predilection for prostitutes public is a way of taking agency in the formation of his identity: he actively defines himself before others label him; his active sexuality is meant to show to all that his dwarfism does not affect his virility in the least. At the same time, it is an essential component of his tormented relation to his father. By being openly known for his predilection, he continues insulting the family's name after his father refused to make him his heir on the ground that he would never allow Tyrion to make Castelry Rock his whorehouse. The oedipal conflict culminates with Tyrion's patricide when he discovers one of his favorite mistresses, Shae, in his father's bed:

> Tywin: "You shot me."
> Tyrion: "You always were quick to grasp a situation, my lord, that must be why you are the Hand of the king."
> Tywin: "You, you are no … no son of mine."
> Tyrion: "Now that's where you're wrong, father. Why, I believe I'm you writ small."[28]

Despite his rhetorical mastery and caustic humor, the patricide is not the answer; Tyrion remains prisoner of his father's manipulation with whom he identifies in the same moment he kills him. While he embarks on a quest to find Tysha, in an attempt to recapture the innocence and happiness his father had destroyed, he comes close to madness. As he crosses the sea to find Tysha, he cannot escape the visions of Tysha's gang rape and his own patricide. If the conflict with his father is synonymous with his fight against the dominant perception of his disability, Tyrion's only actual disability is his acceptance of ableist narrative as a way of moving through the world. Thus, paradoxically, Tyrion does become a figure of "the tortured conscience of man";[29] but this time, as a figure of the torture that results from accepting a normative ideology.

Martin's epic, cloaked in gold and wine, dragons and direwolves, "brings elsewhere home" by dismantling the clichés of disability, examining the costs

28 Geroge R. R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 1073.
29 A trope seen in films like *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

of ableist ideologies, and uncovering the fear of mortality and vulnerability that compels people to build a wall separating themselves from the disabled, and from their own fear, a strategy that only renders them inevitably more vulnerable. Because, as Martin warns us: "Fear cuts deeper than swords."

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