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Review Essay
Disability History: Why We Need Another “Other”

CATHERINE J. KUDLICK

NOT SINCE JOAN WALLACH SCOTT heralded a new age with her “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” have historians faced such an exciting time to rethink what we do.¹ Over the past two decades, our cousins in anthropology and literature have produced essays and monographs dealing with disability as a historical subject.² The fields that blazed the trail for studying race, gender, and sexuality while introducing postmodernism and the linguistic turn have provided valuable analytic and theoretical tools for exploring this new Other.³ Now the work

Many colleagues and students provided references, clarifications, and comments, making this a truly collaborative effort. Since it would take pages to list my intellectual debts, I can only single out the anonymous readers and those who could practically be co-authors because they read this essay in so many incarnations: Paul Longmore, Susan Mann, Mark Sherry, and John Vickrey Van Cleve. Special thanks also to Baki Tezcan for putting the right book in my hand at the right time. Named and unnamed, please accept my deepest thanks. I apologize for any omissions or inaccuracies, which are inevitable in such a task.

¹ Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999), 28–52; originally published in *AHR* 91 (December 1986): 1053–75.

² Although the quality of the historical scholarship varies, these works offer important insights and leads. Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York, 2001); Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York, 1995); Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (London, 1997); David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, eds., *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997); Peter W. Graham and Fritz H. Oehlschlaeger, *Articulating the Elephant Man: John Merrick and His Interpreters* (Baltimore, 1992); Nora Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840–1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993); Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia, 1999); Susan Plann, *A Silent Minority: Deaf Education in Spain, 1550–1835* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign, and Visual Culture in Modern France* (Princeton, N.J., 1995); Allen Thiher, *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature* (Ann Arbor, 2000).

³ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York, 1963), is the most widely cited early book to theorize the issue of disability, although an impressive group of earlier works that explored disability as a minority status would be well worth resuscitating, both as primary and secondary sources: Roger G. Barker, “The Social Psychology of Physical Disability,” *Journal of Social Issues* 4 (1948): 4; Roger G. Barker, Beatrice A. Wright, and Mollie Gonick, *Adjustment to Physical Handicap and Illness* (New York, 1946). Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966; rpt. edn., New York, 1989), provides a perspective on medicine’s normalizing tendencies. For more recent discussions of disability and theory, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, 1997); Lennard J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York, 2002); David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2000); Tobin Siebers, ed., *The Body Aesthetic: From Fine Art to Body Modification* (Ann Arbor, 2000); Rod Michalko, *The Difference That Disability Makes* (Philadelphia,

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