Aging Artists and Impairment in Fifteenth-Century England

Kathleen E. Kennedy · University of Bristol


When I was fourteen my dad taught me how to use his camera, an old Pentax. After we got the film developed, he marveled at the clarity of my hand-held long exposures. Middle-aged, he passed the camera on to me: he could no longer hold it still enough to take photographs like mine. We do not tend to think of digital cameras’ image stabilization as an assistive device, helping us complete an artistic technique that we cannot physically accomplish otherwise, but it can be. Now middle-aged myself, shake reduction technologies rescue me from my dad’s difficult decision. His camera, my first camera, came to me through a combination of my father’s aging tremor, my youthful stillness, the physical limitations of early SLR camera technology, and the human, physiological demands of art.

In this article, we are going to stare at art, and at the work of medieval artists impaired by tremor who could not enjoy the benefit of digital image stabilization. For several decades on either side of 1450, the margins of English manuscripts fill with undulating sprays of ink vines made of single, long strokes fringed with feathering made of more single strokes. Delicate and mobile, this newly popular technique required an extremely steady hand. Yet, in some manuscripts, hand tremor visibly alters the aspect of the art, manifestly demonstrating that some artists controlled
their own linework imperfectly, however masterful their technique otherwise. In Allison Hobgood and David Houston Wood’s terms, we will practice “ethical staring” at this art. With them, I contend that this article “suggests that we have not been staring hard or well enough at representations of disability right beneath our noses.”[1] As they did for early modern literature, so I hope that we can develop a method of “generous staring” at medieval art so that “we stop refusing to look.”[2] We live in a time when “ableism functions like the air we breathe without knowing we are taking it in….Furthermore, ableism incites disability stigma and prescribes a very limited range of [negative] reactions.”[3] We must learn to stare at our own ableism as art critics as generously as we learn to stare at impaired medieval art. Once we learn to see it, visible impairment makes the border and initial art of this half-century a rich and heretofore unexplored resource for labor history, history of medicine, and the history of disability. Importantly, artistic and codicological evidence offered by some impaired medieval artists reveals ways in which modern conceptions of the impaired laboring body may fail when applied to medieval disabilities.

I will progress in several stages. First, I will introduce the sources using three case studies, limners working with tremors about whom we know more than usual. Each artist’s tremor influenced their work in a variety of ways, from the unconscious shaking of the lines themselves to the artists’ deliberate motif selection. Further, tracing the networks in which these artists worked enables us to say a great deal about the sources of support they accessed, and the value of their work to their patrons. Next, I consider what we know today about tremor from a medical perspective, and I introduce the Tremulous Hand of Worcester, and show how developments in modern medical science have shifted historical interpretation of the Tremulous Hand’s diagnosis over time. Then, I begin introducing concepts from Disability Studies in order to explore how medieval authors medicalized tremor as an impairment associated with aging. Currently, Disability Studies as a field deemphasizes diagnosis in order to confront socially and culturally constructed power relations and to question the relationship between impairment, inability, and disability. The case studies of medieval impaired artists support scholars demanding closely historically situated analysis when working on disability in historical eras. However, the body must remain central to such efforts. Tobin Siebers spoke of Disability Studies generally when he said that, “serious consideration of the disabled body exposes that our current theories of reality are not as sophisticated as we would like to think…they lop off a great deal of reality in the process, most notably, the hard simple realism of the body,” and the work of impaired artists directly underscores Siebers’ contention.[4] Medieval art made by impaired artists highlights limitations to

a range of scholarly methodologies that we might prefer not to see, but at which we must “stop refusing to look.”

**The Artist’s Hand and the Critic’s Eye**

Manuscripts were handicrafts par excellence. From parchment to copying to decoration to binding, expert craftsmen fabricated every bit of them by hand. Therefore it is not surprising to find evidence of mistakes, and these are all part of the reality of the pre-industrial book. Art is no different, and a range of errors can regularly be found in manuscript art—pigment and ink smudges, mis-sizing or placement of initials and motifs, failure to understand instructions to limners, and more. We might redirect any surprise we experience in finding mistakes or impaired artists’ work in manuscripts back onto ourselves: such a reaction reflects an especially post-industrial expectation of material regularity. Machines make mistakes too, but differently than human craftsmen do. In craftwork, a level of irregularity is normative.

Thus it is worth exploring the limits of that normativity, ask how those limits map onto our own expectations about art, and investigate whether we can assess anything about medieval views on regularity in art. In other words, we can ask if these impaired artists made impaired art. The work of impaired artists offers us a heightened irregularity at which to stare in answering these questions. “Disability brings to the fore,” the invisibility of the craftsperson to modern scholars, those at whom we do not stare, “reminding us of the contingent, interdependent nature of bodies and their situated relationship to physical ideals.”[5] Scholars in Disability Studies regularly ask what the notion of a normative bodymind means, when every human’s body and mind are unique, and differently expressed and experienced through the many cultures in which we experience them. Unusually, the sources offered here allow us to distinguish between some normative and non-normative art.

Hundreds of illuminated manuscripts remain that were decorated in fifteenth-century England, and many of them were made in the fifty years under analysis. Earlier in the fifteenth century and before, vine borders were wide and fleshy, and stiffly boxed in the text. Once adopted in England in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, single-stroke vines continued to be employed in some borders for over a hundred years. After about 1475, however, these vines increasingly shared space with newer styles derived from Flemish strewn borders.[7] For our purposes, this study concentrates on the fifty years during which this style of vinework was the primary technique employed by English limners. The vast majority of these sprays show remarkably controlled lines, as in Fig. 1. Longer strokes might extend in waving lines across entire margins. Clustered into sprays, short lines executed in single, smooth strokes end in green lobes. Whether drawn free-hand or using a mahl as an assistive aid, fully controlled linework was clearly the desired outcome for mid-fifteenth-century English limners, even if small and occasional irregularities were normal. Instances where artists consistently failed to fully control their linework across spray after spray stand out as non-normative, therefore, foregrounding, causing us to stare, at the contingency of both the artists’ bodies and the relationship of their work to medieval aesthetic ideals. I know of nearly two dozen

manuscripts made inside just a few decades, less than fifty years, that show spraywork marked by tremors, and identify more every year.[8] Undoubtedly, artists have always worked with tremors (and continue to do so today), though it was sometimes less immediately visible in their art than in the mid-fifteenth century.[9]

Three case studies offer evidence for the present article, and are intended to be illustrative, rather than comprehensive. The first offers an unusually detailed snapshot of an impaired artist, whom I will call the Oxford Limner, illuminating multiple manuscripts in a single year, late 1441, or very early 1442, for a specific, clerical patron. Second, the extremely successful and prolific group of artists known as the Followers of the Corpus Master included one or more members working with a slight tremor from the 1430s into the 1450s. Their known patrons were highly educated, often clergy. Lastly, the Troy Book Decorator employed a style widely held to characterize metropolitan art of the 1450s and 1460s, and they seem to have enjoyed commissions from high-ranking patrons that were sometimes intended as gifts for royalty. Each of these artists decorated more than one extant manuscript, and so we can be sure that the tremor occurred across multiple projects.

![Image of the Oxford Limner's tremor, Oxford, Balliol College, MS 276, fol. 15r. Reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Balliol College.](image)

The Oxford Limner offers us a glimpse into a few months in the working life of an artist in Oxford, and perhaps within Balliol College specifically.[11] As we can see in Fig. 2, their single-lines ending in green lobes all shake. Longer, serpentine strokes run through the center of each spray of green lobes and coil in opposite directions at each end of the vine. Whether short or long, straight or curved, each and every line

drawn by the Oxford Limner vibrates. Less visible under the pigment, the outlines of the colored motifs also waver. This art illustrates an impairment.

The Oxford Limner introduces the possibility that some impaired artists took steps to mitigate the effect their tremors had on their craft, employing patterns heavily and restricting motif range, in some cases substantially. At a time when motifs proliferated on sprays, advertising the virtuosity of the artist (and the wealth of the patron), this artist worked in a relatively spare style, limiting themself to a narrow selection of motifs overall. In their eleven champ initials with sprays and single bar border and foliate initial spread over two manuscripts, the Oxford Limner adds only trilobes, quatrefoils, cup and basic trumpet flowers, and these only occasionally, to their leaf forms. Not only few in number, these motifs are also quite old-fashioned by the 1440s, showing none of the array of aroid forms that proliferated beginning in the 1420s.[12] While the Oxford Limner managed to make this thin selection lively and current enough, especially in the bouncing sprays of the champs, it is not difficult to see the extreme restriction as an impairment-management strategy. This artist felt most confident reproducing these long-practiced motifs, and stuck with them, eschewing the wider range of aroids and newer designs popular in mid-century England.

Moreover, the Oxford Limner illustrates how impaired artists deliberately reproduced motifs, that is, replicated near-identical designs, to a greater extent than their peers. While few remain extant today, artists heavily employed pattern books in the Middle Ages, and proof of this practice can be found in the common replication of near-identical leaf forms. Many artists employed leaf-patterns and essentially endlessly duplicated their own designs, rotated at any angle, and in mirror image, in many illuminated English volumes from mid-century onward. The pattern-leaves show just enough variation to prove that they were not traced, but drawn free-hand from a pattern so many times that repetitions became near-copies. As did their unimpaired peers, the Oxford Limner and other impaired artists made use of pattern leaves throughout their work.[13] However, because impaired artists restricted their range of colored motifs so heavily, their reliance on patterns stands out.

Scribes began two commissions for the future bishop of Ely, William Gray, before Gray left Oxford to continue his studies in Cologne in early 1442, and the Oxford Limner decorated the portions of both books that had been copied at the moment that Gray left.[14] Neither volume was finished before his departure, however, and Gray took both with him overseas, where they were finally completed. Though one of the scribes joined Gray’s traveling retinue, the Oxford Limner did not. Famously wealthy, Gray amassed a huge collection of fine manuscripts during his European

university tour. There is absolutely no reason to believe that he was constrained in his choice of artists: he hired the Oxford Limner deliberately.

Tantalizing evidence exists that Gray may have repeatedly commissioned art from older decorators. The Oxford Limner employed largely out-of-date motifs, and they also made extensive use of stippled gold, an antique touch by mid-century. If stippling was present only in the volume containing some humanist material, one might imagine that the technique was deliberately archaizing. Instead, these features are found in both of the Limner’s books. Like the arcs of leaves and the quatrefoils they painted, the stippled gold may suggest that the Oxford Limner was older and had been trained considerably earlier in the century.[15] At the same time that he ordered books by the Oxford Limner, Gray also purchased a great deal of work from another illuminator who, though technically masterful like the Oxford Limner, also employed motifs decades out of date.[16] While we cannot know for sure that either this artist or the Oxford Limner was formally associated with Balliol College, or even the university, it seems likely. Research into Gray’s patronage shows that Oxford, and later Cambridge, graduates moved steadily through his service during his tenure as bishop of Ely.[17] As we will explore in more depth in a later section, a book-loving scholar, Gray may have viewed the Oxford Limner’s tremor with real sympathy, and been eager to find honorable work to pay the aging illuminator to do.

Unlike the other two case studies, it is not clear where the next group of artists worked. (Fig. 3) The Followers of the Corpus Master were a group of artists employing a Continentally influenced style first developed by an artist known as the Corpus Master, for his decoration of the famous Corpus Troilus manuscript.[19] While the Followers’ characteristic style can be identified in over two dozen manuscripts, only a third present signs of tremor, and these date across the group’s work from the 1430s into the 1440s.[20] At least one of the Followers experienced a tremor throughout the group’s period of activity, therefore, highlighting the desirability of the Followers’ style to wealthy patrons, as well as an acceptance of irregular art by their commissioners.

Fig. 3. Non-impaired members of the Followers of the Corpus Master demonstrate their dynamism and proliferation of motifs, varying colored motifs on every spray, and varying gold motifs across each segment of the border. Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, MS 39, fol. 75v. Reproduced with gratitude for the university’s CC-BY license on this material.[18]

Both short and long strokes waver in this illustration, but less obviously than in the Oxford Limner’s sample. Perhaps thanks to a less pronounced tremor than the Oxford Limner, or perhaps due to working in a popular style defined in part by a profusion of characteristic motifs, the impaired Follower does not seem to reduce the variety of their motifs compared to their unimpaired colleagues. While the sample illustration (Fig. 4) shows a routine champ initial with basic sprays of green lobes and gold motifs, this simplicity characterizes this volume, rather than the output of this artist. Other samples of their impaired work, such as their decoration of an early

collection of Poggio’s works, demonstrate as inventive a series of motifs as any volume by the Followers. [22]

As a whole, the Followers of the Corpus Master made books owned by extremely wealthy gentry, and both lay and clerical nobility. The Followers decorated volumes for the Abbot of St. Albans, the Bishop of Durham, Cardinal Bourchier, and the Duke d’Orléans, among others. [23] Of these an impaired Follower collaborated on the volume for d’Orléans, but otherwise most of the impaired work appears in volumes decorated in a unique, humanist, Italianate style developed by the Followers. [24] Unfortunately we do not know who ordered the humanist volumes decorated by the Followers, impaired or not. This was still early in the adoption of humanism in England, however, and the new learning was limited to select nobility, such as Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, and a slightly wider pool of clergy educated in the universities, like Gray. People like this hired the Followers to decorate these manuscripts in their striking, humanist variant style, and this unique specialization may also help explain their willingness to hire the group’s impaired colleague’s mild tremor too.

Unlike the Followers, the Troy Book Decorator did not work in a unique style derived from an earlier generation, but a style employed generally by artists working in and

around London (or trained in London) during these decades. However, like the Oxford Limner, this artist restricted their motif selection, and this gives their collected works an even stronger appearance of unity than they might otherwise present. After the opening page, the Troy Book Decorator served as the sole initial and border artist on a lavishly illuminated copy of the Lancastrian poet John Lydgate’s *Troy Book*, painting four partial bar borders and dozens of champ initials with short sprays of gold motifs like those by the Follower of the Corpus Master in Fig. 4. [26] As the perfect identity of the technique, motifs, and tremor make clear, the Troy Book Decorator also painted all of the illuminated foliate and *champ* initials, their sprays, and the single border in a small psalter. [27] Despite the apparent lack of financial constraints of the *Troy Book*’s patron, and at a time when motifs proliferated, this artist worked in a relatively spare style (Fig. 5), limiting themself to a few painted motifs per spray, and a narrow selection of colored motifs overall, even early in their impairment’s onset. [28] Their large, trilobed trumpet flowers are unusual and serve as a signature of this artist. In thousands of lines making up the decoration in dozens of initials and borders across the two volumes, the Troy Book Decorator’s hand wavers even more than the Oxford Limner’s. Whether long or short, each stroke writhes, with an amplitude of tremor, that is, the distance from a centerline the hand travels, visually different than the other two case-study artists demonstrate. The Decorator’s tremor is easily visible also in the outlines of the colored motifs, as can be seen in the hat flower and the kidney in Fig. 5, and even some of the extremely short edges of the gold diamonds. Exceptionally, evidence exists for the development of the Troy Book Decorator’s tremor over a short period of time. A third example of the Decorator’s art remains, and the artist’s lone border and initial in an earlier Life of St. Edward the Confessor display a less-developed tremor than the *Troy Book* or psalter. [29]

The Troy Book Decorator benefited from an obviously wealthy network that stretched from the capital to Wales. [30] Coats of arms show that the *Troy Book* volume was commissioned by Sir William Herbert and his wife, Anne Devereux. [31] An important figure in Wales, Herbert’s loyalties were courted on both sides of the Wars of the Roses, and he was pardoned by the Lancastrian king Henry VI in 1457 for Yorkist military action. (Members of Devereux’ family also played signal roles in the Wars of the Roses.) Yet Herbert was already in the Yorkist camp, and Edward IV quickly made him a Garter Knight after the victory at Towton in 1461. The miniature of Herbert and Devereux before the king on the first page makes it clear that the volume was intended as a royal gift (though in the end, never given), but it remains an open question whether this copy of Lydgate’s *Troy Book* was intended as a propitiatory gift for Henry or a celebratory one for Edward. I agree with Sonja Drimmer that “Herbert may have fallen off the Lancastrian wagon too often to

convince us that he would have invested in a lavish manuscript to guarantee his loyalty, but it is possible that during this turbulent period precisely this sort of investment was necessary.”[32]

We can be certain that Herbert and Devereux planned their royal gift strategically, and the slightly earlier Life of St. Edward the Confessor decorated by the same artist makes it even more likely that the Lydgate manuscript was intended for the Lancastrians. Unrecognized before now, the saint’s life likely reflects a royal gift marking the birth of Prince Edward, in 1453. Tragically, the king remained unaware of this grand news, enduring almost eighteen months of near-total incapacitation in which he could barely move without assistance, and neither spoke nor seemed to understand those speaking to him. I believe this explains why Margaret of Anjou’s arms, rather than Henry’s, historiate the initial in the saint’s life.[33] Small-format, and only a few quires long, with a single illuminated page, such books were common gifts to English royals for New Year’s, or to celebrate events like marriages and births. The motifs of the decoration are identical to the other two volumes, but in 1453 or early 1454, the Troy Book Decorator’s tremor marked their art less than it did in the other volumes. Herbert’s portrait opening the Troy Book does not show the garter bestowed on him in 1461, by which point the miniature must have been completed. The likelihood is that the saint’s life dates to late 1453 or early 1454, and that both the psalter and Troy Book date to the mid- or later-1450s.[34] Hired repeatedly to paint gifts for Lancastrian royals, the Troy Book Decorator’s art could not have been understood as in any way second-rate, tremor included.

**Tremor**

Hands can shake for many reasons, and the delicate ink vine-work popular in English manuscript decoration by the second quarter of the fifteenth century unforgivingly displayed every bobble. Of course, attempting to assess tremors as we would today in clinical settings is not fully possible. Yet, surprisingly, this limitation reflects the historical nature of the evidence less than it does current scientific debate. A range of tremors are diagnosed today primarily through handwriting and drawing tests, including curves very like the medieval evidence we have from these artists. Modern clinicians also observe hand and arm movement, however, and for some tremors clinicians employ an array of diagnostic instruments that we cannot apply to medieval people. Beyond these challenges, however, lies the very difficulty of tremor itself. In a gross sense, tremor is obvious: we can feel it and watch it occur. Nevertheless, the medical root causes of most tremors remain unknown, and even how we differentiate tremors remains vexed. As they seek to isolate mechanisms, scientists continuously improve the range of data we can collect on the tremors.

experienced by individuals today, and so approaches to taxonomy continue to change.

As we understand it now, in the early 2020s, tremors divide into one of three large, loose categories. One of the most common tremors, essential tremor, illustrates this range.[35] Essential tremor often, but not always, develops from genetic predisposition, and its causes remain unknown. Essential tremor may begin in childhood, adolescence, or during middle age, though middle age is most common. Perhaps understandably given that range of unknowns, clinicians concentrate on describing the tremor itself. Essential tremors occur on both sides of the body, and the mark of essential tremor is its regularity.[36] Thus, drawings made by people with essential tremors will show small, symmetrical, regular wobbling in the lines, including the lines of vine-work drawn by medieval artists.

But essential tremor is not the only common tremor. Dystonic tremor presents in younger or middle-aged people, and its causes, too, remain unknown. Fatigue, stress and repetitive actions like handwriting or playing an instrument can trigger dystonia: task-specific dystonia is even medically called writer’s or musician’s cramp.[37] While there may be a genetic component in some cases, most seem related to a wide range of conditions that damage or reprogram the brain, from the simple act of repetitive gesture, to TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury), to Parkinson’s Disease, stroke, infections like tuberculosis, and even heavy metal poisoning.[38] Unlike essential tremor’s regularity, dystonic tremor features irregular, jerky shaking and uneven pen pressure, and this is all visible in handwriting tests.[39] We can easily imagine how medieval scribes and artists might experience employment-related dystonia.

Functional tremor results in the most variable handwriting tests, in part because this tremor itself varies so much.[40] Functional tremor increases when a person is stressed, decreases when distracted, and its onset can be abrupt.[41] Thus, unlike the other common tremors, functional tremor has a strong psychological component. These features mean that handwriting tests fail to capture all of the diagnostic elements of functional tremor to a greater degree than other tremors. Clearly, of the three types of tremor as understood today, functional tremor leaves the weakest evidence in the medieval artistic record.

Medievalists are most familiar with tremors due to the work of a well known scribe, the so-called Tremulous Hand of Worcester, and the various ways his tremor has been diagnosed over time. (Fig. 6) Probably a monk, the Tremulous Hand copied glosses into a series of volumes in the Worcester Cathedral Priory over a span of decades in the thirteenth century. In 1991, Christine Franzen published an extensive

treatment of the Tremulous Hand’s work as a glossator and translator, but spent only a very brief space on his tremor.[43] Historians’ explanation of the cause of the Tremulous Hand’s tremor has shifted over the years as medical understanding of tremor has changed. Franzen cited medical specialists who noted that the Tremulous Hand’s tremor worsened over time, at least a decade or more, and may have been congenital, rather than a condition such as Parkinson’s.[44] Most recently, medievalist Deborah Thorpe and clinical neurologist Jane Alty assessed the Tremulous Hand’s script using current diagnostic best-practices from the 2010s, “the first time medieval handwriting has been analysed by a neurologist with a specialist interest in movement disorders,” and the most extensive analysis of the tremor itself since Franzen.[45] Thorpe and Alty argued that, as far as it can be determined based on his glosses alone, the Tremulous Hand experienced what today is called an essential tremor.

As historians, whether we agree or not with attempts to diagnose medieval people with modern syndromes, the very visibility of tremor on the page, and the range of ages and potential mechanisms behind it offer a tantalizing body of evidence. Today, we recognize that a range of illnesses (including toxin exposure) and experiences (including writing and drawing by hand) may lead people to develop tremor, and historians understand that illness was widely suffered and difficult to treat in the Middle Ages. Yet, we also know that diseases have changed since the Middle Ages, and must therefore be cautious about assigning individual symptoms to specific medical conditions. Further, Hobgood and Wood remind us that to stare ethically, we must allow the art to stare back. Thus we must acknowledge that when medieval people themselves discussed tremor, they associated it overwhelmingly with aging.

The Tremor of Medieval Age

While still developing as a specialization, the study of medieval disabilities has been stymied by a lack of historical sources, in contrast to the abundance of literary references (though this literature was often written by non-disabled authors).[46] In this respect, book artists and their dense social networks offer important insight, regardless of the specific type of tremor they exhibit. At the same time, the evidence offers, at best, ambiguous answers to questions surrounding the distinction between impairment and disability in the Middle Ages.

Traditionally, definitions of disability were based on a medical model, in which any deviation from a normative body involved a disability. More recently, and with the involvement of disabled scholars, activists have developed social and cultural models of disability.[47] In the social model, a physical deviation from the norm may reveal a

bodily impairment. However, an impairment counts as a disability only if it inhibits the individual in society. As Richard Godden put it, “impairment alone is insufficient, and it is only when an individual cannot perform some perceived social function that they become disabled.”[48] For example, many people today experience mildly impaired eyesight, and under a medical model, could be counted as disabled. However, few would identify this impairment as a disability, since assistive devices such as contacts and eyeglasses are commonly available, and those who use them suffer few social consequences for doing so. Under a social model in the early twenty-first century, visual impairment correctable with lenses remains simply that, physiological impairment, and is not a disability.

Some scholars see impairment and disability as so different in the Middle Ages as to break the social model. John Sexton claims that

A further important distinction is the absence of a general medicalization of the atypical body. While medieval medicine did recognize some bodies as dysfunctional or suffering...the external recourse of persons marked by difference who wished to understand their bodies was in social and comparative relation to their communities.... It is, rather, through this social context and interpretation that an atypical body would find its definition.[49]

Sexton offers important cautions for analysis of medieval impaired artists. However, as we shall see, medieval medicine and culture did medicalize tremor. Therefore, social and cultural niches existed for medieval people who experienced tremors and they also benefited from medical ways to understand their bodies as atypical. This leaves open the question of whether or not their atypical bodies created social barriers, that is, if they were disabled according to the social model. The evidence for this remains equivocal, but suggests that perhaps the “social context and interpretation” of tremor-impaired artists was of disability, but one associated with the common process of aging.

Age presents challenges to theories of disability today, and it did in the Middle Ages too. Aging bodies (and minds as a part of our bodies) begin to falter, and the likelihood that we experience disability rises as we get older. If everyone is impaired or disabled (or will be eventually, if they live long enough), in other words, then what do these categories mean? In the Middle Ages, the seeming inevitability of impairment raised anxieties of all sorts, even as age did not serve as a disabling condition on its own.[50] There were hail and fit elders in medieval society. In just one bookish example, the copyist of the humanist volumes decorated by the Followers of

the Corpus Master discussed earlier, Thomas Candour, already had a successful career when he earned his doctorate in 1446, and yet he did not return to a retirement sinecure in England as royal chaplain until 1477.[51] Thus for almost all of quite a long life, Candour seems to have avoided debilitating impairments. Still, in a world where most bodies labored, physical inability to work, or even simply to work to the level of one’s younger days, stressed communities and clearly led to substantial anxiety on the part of many adults. Age might be socially supported, but there was no cure for it in 1450, any more than there is today.

Perhaps understandably given their working lives, medieval authors often lamented age-related impairments that impacted reading and writing. Medieval literature betrays an overwhelming fear of eyesight failing, in some cases to blindness. Gilles le Muisit described his own fourteenth-century cataract surgery, and rejoiced at his renewed ability to see distance, but noted sadly that he still could not see well enough to read or write, because he was old (in his eighties at the time).[52] Petrarch reacted with disgust when he was finally driven to use eyeglasses.[53]

Medieval authors linked tremor tightly with aging, and, while less disabling than blindness, tremor also received attention widely in literature. Augustine and Bonaventure both associated tremor and aging.[54] Many, from Robert Grosseteste to John of San Gemignano, Albrecht van Eyb, to the Cursor Mundi, mentioned trembling of limbs.[55] Translating Galen, Arnald of Villanova cited tremor, and a range of authors, from Lothario de Segni (Innocent III) to Boccaccio described trembling hands and fingers specifically.[56] Medieval sources’ strong association of age and tremor may even suggest that a person might be perceived as old, in some sense at least, at whatever age they developed a tremor.

“Artisans never retired,” Shulamith Shahar asserted, though she admitted that some laborers became “too ill or disabled to go on working,” and that medieval society understood this to be true of artisans specifically.[57] Mark O’Tool demonstrated an awareness in medieval Paris that some crafts could lead to specific occupational-related impairments, and that these could in some cases prevent work, and require care.[58] Thus, impairment could play a role both in the decision to retire from working life, and in the social support network available to medieval retirees. While the medieval wealthy could purchase a place in a retirement home and care there, as they do today, many others received stipends from guilds (both craft and parish), employers, or charities.[59] Out of necessity or choice, recipients augmented many of these stipends with some combination of charity and whatever work they could still manage.[60] By the fifteenth century charity often arrived with strings attached, however, and in many cases supported those already well-placed within

local networks.[61] Both Bianca Frohne and Ninon Dubourg have stressed the degree to which social standing played a key role in how individuals and communities expressed the experience of impairment.[62] Nevertheless, while age alone did not necessarily mark a person as socially deserving of charity, in practice, impairment seems to have done.[63] In 1450, a well-connected, impaired, elderly person had a high likelihood of being perceived as worthy and of receiving support if they requested it.[64]

The specific contexts of some of the volumes studied here suggest that these commissions served as acts of charity, sometimes very public charity, to impaired artisans.[65] Medieval Christianity understood giving charity to those declared to be the deserving poor and elderly in exchange for prayer to be a worthy act.[66] Godden and Irina Metzler both discussed charity offered to those incapable of working.[67] Lindsey Row-Heyveld described this charitable economy in the strongest possible terms: “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,” a transaction of “spiritual commerce” that involved hard finances.[68] In Dubourg’s strident summary, for the medieval wealthy, disabled people functioned “as vectors of salvation.”[69]

From a modern perspective, such an exchange patronized (in its pejorative sense) impaired professionals in the process of supporting them, but medieval recipients may have viewed this enactment of social superiority differently. Medieval English society was deeply hierarchical, so that experiencing social inferiority was a normal part of life for everyone but kings. But society was also reciprocal, at least in theory: those higher on the ladder bore responsibilities to those below. It is therefore entirely possible that impaired artists viewed charitable hiring as their patrons’ responsibility and that, to the artists, their patrons were fulfilling their caregiving duties to their social subordinates. In this scenario, impaired artists may well have appreciated that their patrons hired them in an imperfect world, where the sole punishment for failure to care for the needy would land on the powerful only in afterlife. As required by the Statute of Laborers, these artists continued to work, and do so at very high levels of their profession: if their patrons’ response to the artists’ impairment was the fear or disgust Godden found in medieval literature, then the wealthy overcame that response and in no way did this art reflect poorly on either patrons or artists.[70]

In fact, impaired craftspeople might have reaped multiple benefits from such transactions. Patrons assisted these artists in avoiding what medieval theology viewed as potentially sinful idleness and, by hiring them, enabled them to continue

to fulfill their social function as laborers. At the same time, while earning necessary income, these artists also engaged their craft, and in so doing, reinforced a perhaps equally needed source of identity and personal satisfaction.

The evidence may point to even more benefits for both patron and artisan, however, and speculatively, I propose that we consider impaired craft as a specific arena for medieval charity. In this scenario, patrons might choose to support impaired individuals in part because they were both impaired and making craft marked by that impairment. If a wealthy person offered alms to a poor person and received prayers in return, both sides might benefit, but the transaction was limited. In contrast, I propose that when the craft resulting from an act of charity was marked by the impairment, then the charity that purchased the art also came to be recorded in (near) perpetuity in society, and not just in heaven. Therefore, a book with art offering visible proof of such charity may have carried other, longer-lasting social benefits to the commissioner, as a potentially public receipt of charitable giving.

Moreover, such added benefit may not only have accrued to the patron of the impaired craftworker, and we should also ask whether this additional spiritual commerce worked both directions. If impaired craft could serve as an unusually permanent marker of charity for the patron, might the impaired artists have received prayers, too, along with their pay? Dubourg claimed that representations of disabled people in the margins of medieval books served as reminders to the wealthy to practice charity.[71] How much more powerful would that reminder have been if the illumination itself showed it to have been painted by an impaired artist? When the Troy Book Decorator’s psalter was used, did the devotee also pray for the artist, whose impairment, and (from the medieval perspective) age, called to them from the pages in their hands? Was it hoped that even the highest nobility, such as King Henry, who confronted disability himself, or Queen Margaret, caregiver to a king and a country, might pray for the artist who had decorated the opening border of their Life of St. Edward the Confessor, tremor and all? Surely such a prayerful responsibility would have been clear to men like William Gray, a bishop (and one especially careful of pastoral duty), and the clerical patrons of the Followers.

Any conclusions to be drawn must be speculative, but nevertheless remain leading. As Godden put it, “to understand physical impairment in the Middle Ages (and today) is to discern the social attitudes toward physical difference, the institutions (social, legal, religious) that separate the disabled from the nondisabled, and the web of social relationships in which disabled people find themselves.”[72] While modern medicine suggests a range of potential roots of tremor, medieval culture medicalized tremor as an impairment associated with aging. Tremor sometimes resulted in art

that medieval artists themselves understood to be irregular. The Oxford Limner and the Troy Book Decorator seem to have taken steps to minimize the effect of their tremors on their art, from severely reducing the number of motifs from onset of their symptoms, to increasing their reliance on patterns. Patrons seem also to have viewed this art as irregular. Gray’s apparently repeated hiring of more than one older artist may provide more evidence for charitable commissioning of irregular or outmoded art, as does the repeated hiring of the Troy Book Decorator to paint royal gifts. Their tremors impaired these artists, both from a modern and from a medieval perspective, therefore. It remains more speculative that impaired craft might have born more weight in the spiritual economy than other kinds of charity. Thus, the artists may not fully “illuminate the often ambiguous and ambivalent space that the physically impaired occupied in medieval society,” but they offer excellent examples of that ambiguity.[73]

It may be that medieval Disability Studies struggles not only with a lack of evidence, but also with our own gestalt. On a fundamental level, our contemporary approach to bodies, labor, and art, mired as it must be in late stage capitalism, may not be capable of fully grappling with the impaired laboring body and irregular art in the Middle Ages. Their art demonstrates that these artists were impaired. The books they decorated hint that the artists dynamically engaged twin economies, of labor and of piety, and that they may well have actively leveraged their impaired status in both. Does this suggest disability, or something else? Moreover, in medieval society only a very few enjoyed power to do whatever they liked, and so, from a modern point of view, we must ask: if (nearly) everyone in society is socially restricted to some degree, what does disability mean? Would knowing further specifics about the artists, their families, their own prosopographies, help? It may be equally possible that such information would not provide the clear answers we seek. But perhaps searching creates a different kind of reward.

We must challenge ourselves to understand medieval impaired laborers both as potentially full of agency and as socially constrained as their unimpaired colleagues. We must struggle to grasp that they could be impaired physically as we can be today, but that they understood their impairments, and experienced social impairment, in ways both different from and similar to ourselves. Further, as theorist and activist Siebers challenged, with this medieval art we can practice “retroactive reading of disability that recoups any semblances of disability in past works and demands that they be viewed anew as avatars of disabled people [today].”[74]

References


6 This manuscript is digitized in full here https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_18_d_ii_f006r


8 For examples from roughly the fifty years under examination here, in addition to the manuscripts cited elsewhere in this article, see also Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.11.9; Oxford, Jesus College, MS 124; Oxford, St. John’s College, MSS 179 (added devotional image), and 187, and San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 932. For examples outside this period, see for example New York, Columbia University Library, MS Plimpton 275 (based on the presence of striations and squared-off sprays I take to be 1504 and not 1448), and Kew, National Archives, SP 9/1/2, a grant of arms dated 1517.

In both early Tudor cases we might consider that, if these artists were older, they were trained in the period under discussion.

Likewise, the sources examined here are also limited by my own working life as a researcher, and so religious and legal manuscripts are likely overrepresented in my sample, as are limners over ink rubricators, whose flourished initials may offer even more plentiful sources for tremor research than do illuminated manuscripts. Finally, I specialize in English manuscripts, and styles used elsewhere in Europe are also likely to illustrate artists' tremors.

Digitized at https://secure.flickr.com/photos/balliolarchivist/36198155281/in/album-72157643010321853/

The two volumes known to contain this artist's work are Oxford, Balliol College, MSS 276 and 78A, hereafter Balliol 276 and Balliol 78A. Digitized in full at https://secure.flickr.com/photos/balliolarchivist/albums/72157643010321853/page1 Part of Balliol 78A is digitized at https://secure.flickr.com/photos/balliolarchivist/albums/72157645054141513

For the dating of the introduction and popularization of aroids, see Scott, Dated & Datable, 46.

Compare for example, the top two acanthus leaves on Balliol 276, fol. 43v to the two, matching blue and green leaves in second and third positions on the outside of the initial of Balliol 78A, fol. 2r. Further, almost all the leaves are positive or mirror images in Balliol 78A, fol. 2r and Balliol 276, fol. 43v. Almost every border of London, British Library, MS Royal 18 D. II, discussed below, also shows a similar reuse of pattern-leaves.

Balliol MSS 276, 78A, and M. C. de la Mare, Duke Humphrey and English Humanism in the Fifteenth Century: Catalogue of an Exhibition Held in the Bodleian Library Oxford (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 1970), 25-6; Roger Mynors, Catalogue of the Manuscripts of

While the majority of this artist’s motifs and palette reflect training in the first or second decade of the century, the artist had made some updates, too, adding a brighter green and orange color to their muted, early palette, and a few aroids on high-level borders. Like the Oxford Limner, this artist’s favored update was full adoption of lobed sprays. See London, British Library MS Royal 7 F. XII, and Oxford, Balliol College MSS 28, 29, 30, 122, and 315 for samples. On the scribes and dating, see Mynors, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Balliol College*, xxvi-xxviii, and Rundle, *The Renaissance Reform of the Book*, 70-4, 124.


Digitized at http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/UoEwmm~1~1~76843~104037?trs=1&qvq=q%3A9999993%3Bsort%3AWork_Title%2CWork_Creator_Name%2CWork_Shelfmark%3Blc%3AUoEwmm~1~1&mi=0&cic=UoEwmm~1~1&sort=Work_Title%2CWork_Creator_Name%2CWork_Shelfmark


Followers’ volumes that show tremor include: London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 369; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 915; Oxford, Magdalen College, MS 39; Oxford, New College, MS 271; Oxford, Merton College, fragment pasted into 76.a.6; Glasgow,
University of Glasgow, MS Hunter 274; and Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Latin 1196, on which more than one member of the Followers collaborated, one with a tremor, and one without.

21 Samples digitized at: https://images.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/luna/servlet/detail/LPLIBLPL~17~17~8424~102184?sort=creator%2Ctype%2Cdate%2Ctitle&qvq=q:ENGLISH%20NEW%20TESTAMENT;sort:creator%2Ctype%2Cdate%2Ctitle&mi=19&trs=70

22 Bodley 915.

23 Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B. 11. 11 (Bourchier); BnF Lat. 1196 (d’Orléans); Durham, Durham Cathedral Priory Library, MS A. I. 19A, 19B (Durham); London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D. VII (St. Albans).

24 For English humanist manuscript illumination, including that by the Followers, see Kathleen E. Kennedy, "Italian Art and English Artists in the English Quattrocento: Naturally Seeking Out Things Italian," The Sixteenth Century Journal 54 (2023) (forthcoming).


26 This limner did not decorate the opening leaf, as we can see in Fig. 1.

27 New York, Morgan Library, MS M.134.

28 This artist employed a comparatively narrow range of acanthus, diamond leaves, hat flowers with and without carrot-like aroids, and kidney leaves. They decorate gold balls,

trilobes, gold spikey pinecones, and gold diamonds with green-tipped lobes and green-touched squiggles.

29 London, British Library, MS Harley 4976, fol. 1r. This border can be seen here https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=4719&CollID=8&NStart=4976 It also is worth considering that the sprays and initials of the religious roll made for Margaret of Anjou, Oxford, Jesus College, MS 124, may have been painted even earlier by the Troy Book Decorator, as these vines display a tremor similar to that of the St. Edward life. Though sharing only leaf-forms, the execution of the motifs may be similar enough to the Troy Book Decorator’s other work to suggest identity. On the dating of this roll, see Sonja Drimmer, “Beyond Private Matter: A Prayer Roll for Queen Margaret of Anjou,” *Gesta* 53 (2014): 95-120. The miniature there is credited to William Abell, and provides a comparison with Margaret’s arms on the saint’s life.

30 Based on the style of the miniatures and the popularization of the genre of the first miniature in collections of parliamentary statutes in the second half of the century, this Troy Book manuscript has generally been discussed as a product of London. Scott, LGM, II, 284 and see Sonja Drimmer, *The Art of Allusion: Illuminators and the Making of English Literature, 1403-1476* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 151-88.

31 On the volume, see Scott, LGM, II, 282-5.


33 The arms have not before been identified, but they are clearly Margaret’s, simplified a bit given the small size of the initial, and the tarnishing of the silver making the light parts of her arms look dark.

34 St. Osmund was canonized in 1457, but remains absent from the psalter’s calendar, Morgan M. 134.


Alty, Cosgrove, Thorpe, and Kempster, “How to Use Pen and Paper Tasks to Aid Tremor Diagnosis in the Clinic,” 3.

Alty, Cosgrove, Thorpe, and Kempster, “How to Use Pen and Paper Tasks to Aid Tremor Diagnosis in the Clinic,” 3.

NIH, “Tremor Fact Sheet.”

Digitized at https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/pm669yz1553.


48 Godden, “Mobility Impairment,” 45.


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61 Dyer, Standards of Living, 246.


64 Rosenthal’s data from clergy and parliamentary lords highlights this, Old Age in Late Medieval England, 100-4, 107-12.

65 Godden noted the frequent, though not inevitable, imbrication of disability and poverty in the Middle Ages, “Mobility Impairment,” 44.

66 Godden, “Mobility Impairment,” 44-5; Metzler, A Social History of Disability, 156-7.

Godden, “Mobility Impairment,” 46; Metzler, A Social History of Disability, 154-98.


Godden, “Mobility Impairment,” 43, 45.


Godden, “Mobility Impairment,” 36.

Godden, “Mobility Impairment,” 43.
