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Disability and Morality in *The Canterbury Tales*

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of English

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Abstract

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By applying Disability Studies to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, this thesis examines the connection between disability and morality in the Middle Ages. Disability was frequently linked to sin in the Middle Ages as a way of explaining the presence of difference amongst people. This thesis considers how the perceived connection between physiological variations and moral transgressions led to discrimination against people with disabilities.

This project provides a short background on the history of Disability Studies and explains the adaptations needed in order to apply a relatively new theoretical framework to the medieval era. Through the explanation of key terms and models, I discuss the use of the word 'disability', which in this project refers to any bodily or behavioral difference amongst the pilgrims.

The pilgrimage to Canterbury focuses on physical, mental, and spiritual healing. I analyze five pilgrims: the Summoner, the Pardoner, the Wife of Bath, the Cook, and the Reeve. These five pilgrims all exhibit outward signs of internal corruption. Ranging from grotesque to subtle, the pilgrims' bodies reflect the sins they have committed. Physiognomy, or the belief in the correlation between a person's features, appearance, and abilities to their morality, was popular during the Middle Ages. I propose that the combination of physiognomy, the belief that one has control over their disability, and the highly religious society created stigmas towards people who had bodily variations.

The five pilgrims examined in this thesis face varying levels of discrimination. I argue that the level of discrimination corresponds to a 'disability hierarchy' that is portrayed in *The Canterbury Tales*. People whose disabilities were caused by particularly heinous misdeeds encountered more mistreatment than those whose sins were less egregious. Through my examination of the bodies and behaviors of the pilgrims and their interactions with their peers, this thesis demonstrates the social repercussions of the medieval belief in the connection between disability and morality.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to start by acknowledging and thanking my primary adviser for this project, Dr. James Morey. I greatly appreciate all of the help you provided me during the writing of this thesis. I had never been exposed to Chaucer until taking your class during my sophomore year, but your passion and knowledge provided me with a love and appreciation for Chaucer, the medieval time period, and Middle English that I may not have had otherwise. You have also singlehandedly made me a better writer, and for that I will be eternally grateful. Thank you for your understanding and support during this process.

I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Kelleher. Your British Literature Since 1660 survey course was one of my first English classes at Emory and it solidified my desire to be an English major. Additionally, your passion for Disability Studies is inspiring, particularly because this growing field deserves more attention.

To Dr. Karen Hegtvedt, I would like to say thank you for taking on Chaucer and providing me with a sociological perspective. Also, there was never a dull moment in your class and your ability to engage everyone in the classroom is a skill I hope to bring with me into my own classroom next year and beyond.

Additionally, I want to thank Dr. Elizabeth Goodstein for your help throughout the first semester. Many of the tips and tricks you suggested during the conception of my project turned into tools that I referred back to when I felt stuck or confused which was both comforting and helpful.

I would like to thank my boss, Sofya Howard, for supporting me throughout the thesis writing process. Thank you for listening to my anxieties and helping me to maintain my perspective during this journey. Your advice and humor helped me to get through the challenges and obstacles that I faced this year.

My friends, old and new, also deserve acknowledgement for their support and hand-holding during this stressful but rewarding process. I would not have been able to make it through the year without sharing this experience with Maggie and Sonia, pasta Thursdays with Harini, Friday lunches with Mia, mental breaks with Mallory, Michelle, and Carrie, dancing with Christina, Lucy, and Emily, housechurch with John, and the shenanigans of the Longstreet-Means staff.

Last but not least, I want to thank my parents. To my dad, thank you for continued excitement about my thesis and your confidence in me. To my mom, thank you for helping me overcome the multitude of obstacles I faced this year and your endless encouragement and support. Some of the best days I have had during this last year of college took place in Barnes and Noble, at Emory and in Minnesota, as both of you sat with me and let me work for hours on end on my thesis. Thank you.

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Disability and Morality in *The Canterbury Tales*

Introduction

The rise of Disability Studies as a theoretical framework creates an opportunity for new interpretations of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales.* The pilgrims, the tales, and the manuscripts have been the subject of study for centuries, but only recently has Disability Studies been applied to *The Canterbury Tales*. The introduction of Disability Studies as a lens for medieval texts has allowed scholars to question analyses that were previously taken for granted. Due to the more recent genesis of Disability Studies, however, most scholars examine contemporary texts. This thesis applies Disability Studies to an older work of literature and aims to show how *The Canterbury Tales* and the study of disability can mutually inform one another.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* depicts twenty-nine pilgrims on a pilgrimage to Canterbury to visit the site of Saint Thomas à Becket, "that hem hath holpen, whan that they were seke" (I 18). The purpose of a pilgrimage was often to find spiritual or physical healing. Groups of people would travel great distances to visit various shrines or religious sites in hopes that they could prevent or cure an illness. Canterbury was a popular site for pilgrimages because of St. Thomas. St. Thomas was the Archbishop of Canterbury until he was murdered on December 29th, 1170 by four of King Henry II's knights (Scully 581). Robert E. Scully states, "As for Becket himself, the extraordinary circumstances of his death guaranteed for him a fame and influence far greater than he had attained in life. In fact, the first recorded miracle associated with Thomas Becket occurred on the very night of his murder when a man from Canterbury restored his paralyzed wife with the martyr's blood" (582). St. Thomas à Becket became associated with healing powers and pilgrimages to Canterbury were common. Pilgrims from all over wanted to gain access to the relics and power that St. Thomas left behind, especially

because his blood was able to heal a paralyzed woman. Scully elaborates on the population that travelled to Canterbury:

> at first the shrine attracted a disproportionate number of women and members of the lower class, but over time it increasingly attracted more men, more members of the upper class, and more pilgrims from throughout England and from overseas…Thomas [had a] reputation as the 'best physician' and greatest healing saint in northwestern Europe. The power of this belief had clearly been demonstrated by the huge numbers of pilgrims and offerings that flowed into Canterbury in the terrible years of the Black Death in the late 1340's. Whether praying for prevention or a cure, thousands of the faithful sought the intercession of St. Thomas. (584)

The pilgrims who made their way to Canterbury were concerned, to some degree, about their health. For the *Canterbury* pilgrims specifically, traveling on horseback from Southwark to Canterbury and back again was not an easy task, but the journey was worth it if they could find healing from St. Thomas. *The Canterbury Tales* depicts many characters that desire physical, mental, or spiritual healing.

I chose to focus on *The Canterbury Tales* because of the wide selection of people who are depicted. The pilgrims are mostly fictional representations and Chaucer has included members of the clergy, members of the working class, scholars, and even a respected knight. There are definitely identities and classes that are missing from the pilgrimage, particularly those who are unable to physically, financially, or legally participate on the trip from Southwark to Canterbury. The peasant class made up the majority of medieval England, and yet we only see one peasant on the pilgrimage. As a result, Chaucer's work cannot be seen as a perfect replica of medieval society, but the information he provides about the varying occupations, class statuses, and

financial standings of the pilgrims makes *The Canterbury Tales* one of the best literary works for examining disability in the Middle Ages.

Aside from the content of his work I wanted to study Geoffrey Chaucer because of his status as an author and the nuances of his writing. He is one of the most well known authors and his writing is still discussed in classrooms and researched by scholars six centuries later. Chaucer's success is easy to understand when engaging with his body of work. From a subtle play on words to a veiled reference of a Bible verse, Chaucer's style allows for multiple layers and interpretations of the same passage. He has carefully and intentionally crafted every single line of poetry; Chaucer was purposeful in his word choice, his characterization, and his crafting of the plot. Despite his self-deprecation and the *Retraction* he wrote at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer expresses the hope that his writing will be as well received as the Greek and Roman classics. At the end of his retelling of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer writes, "'Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye/…And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace/ Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace" (T&C V 1786, 1791-1792). Chaucer's aspiration to be amongst the classical authors shows in his masterful writing.

One of Chaucer's strengths as an author is the way his works resonate with the reader. Though the pilgrims and their tales may be difficult to find direct connections with, the overarching emotions and the expression of the human experience stretch across centuries. The way in which disability and stigma are presented is an example. As with all literature, Chaucer's intentions do not have to directly correspond with the meaning that a reader finds, particularly in a text dating back to the Middle Ages. Very rarely will a reader know exactly what an author intended to convey in their writing. Authors and readers use their own life experiences when engaging with a text, meaning that one work of literature can inspire multiple readings and

interpretations. It is extremely unlikely that Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* with a modern disability framework in mind, yet his work provides insight into the history of disability and can inform how disability is viewed today. In exploring *The Canterbury Tales* with a disability framework this thesis will examine the link between disability and sin, study the medieval perspective on disability, and consider the social repercussions of the various medieval beliefs about disability.

Chapter 1 is divided into two sections. The first section explores Disability Studies and the history of the field. Broad terms will be explained in this section and a discussion of the various models will be introduced. The second section will discuss Disability Studies within a medieval context. In this section I will detail the difficulties and obstacles of applying a new concept to an old text. I will introduce the concept of disability and morality and review the various medical practices of the Middle Ages.

Chapter 2 contains five sections, each focusing on an individual pilgrim. The first section discusses the Summoner and leprosy. The Summoner is followed by the Pardoner. I will explain why these two pilgrims are often linked and explore the idea that the Pardoner is a eunuch. The third section considers the Wife of Bath's deafness and her suspected infertility. The fourth section looks at the Cook. The Cook's ulcer, the possibility of syphilis, and alcohol addiction are all examined. The final section uses the Reeve to determine the attitudes towards the elderly in the medieval period. This chapter, and the thesis as a whole, will highlight how the range of disabilities portrayed throughout *The Canterbury Tales* provides space for a robust discussion on the stigmas that existed in the Middle Ages while informing why certain prejudices still persist today. By focusing on the connection between disability and morality, this thesis will show how

a belief system that holds individuals responsible for their own impairments was harmful in the past and has led to misconceptions and discrimination in the present.

Chapter 1: Disability Studies and its Application to the Middle Ages

This chapter serves as a broad overview of Disability Studies. The first section contains information about Disability Studies as a rising discipline of interest and the second applies Disability Studies to the Middle Ages. I will provide background on Disability Studies and discuss and define various terms that will be relevant for the examples provided in Chapter 2.

Section 1: Disability Studies

The first line of *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* states, "Disability is everywhere in literature" (Barker 1). Though simple, the idea that people with disabilities are present in all literature addresses a fact that non-disabled people have ignored. Pair this notion with the knowledge that Disability Studies did not fully come into its own as a recognized field until the mid-1990s and it becomes clear that there has been an entire category of people that have been overlooked.

According to the timeline in the *Cambridge Companion*, the first journal to cover Disability Studies was the *Disability Studies Quarterly* that started in 1985 (xiv). From there various books and articles emerged and the field slowly grew. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray explain that:

> [w]ithin sociology, disability studies had already become an established subject area, with scholars and activists involved in the push for independent living from the 1970s onwards. While sociological disability studies sought to uncover the social and

> institutional prejudices that created environments that disempowered and discriminated against people with disabilities, the subject's literary and cultural critiques drew from these social model methodologies and worked in the wake of the waves of feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race studies…[to offer] up new accounts of canonical texts and [bring] new critical paradigms through which to consider disability representation. (3)

The social model creates a distinction between the words 'impairment' and 'disability.' Impairment describes the physical or mental reality of an individual. An impairment becomes a disability when the social world creates obstacles that prohibit an individual with an impairment from engaging in certain behaviors or activities (Eyler 5-6). An example of the social model in action would be how someone who is deaf only becomes disabled when movie theaters screen films without subtitles. The social world creates the disability. Because of Disability Studies' roots in sociology, "[t]he social model still remains the single most influential idea within disability studies and activism" (Barker 5). Understanding how the social world creates disability creates space for discussions about ableism. The definition of ableism is stated as "discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities" (Merriam-Webster). People who do not have to consider their disability status on a daily basis have privilege because most cultures cater to non-disabled people. The social model provides insight into the difficulties that people with disabilities face and works to bring awareness to instances of ableism within the community.

Other frameworks include the cultural model, the medical model, and the religious model. The cultural model does not differentiate between impairment and disability, but rather uses the term disability to include both the physical realities and the societal perception of an individual (Eyler 5-6). The medical model argues that "disability is considered pathological and

in need of a cure" and does not consider the social views of a person with a disability (Wheatley 18). The religious model is defined by Edward Wheatley as the way in which "people understand disability largely through the institutional practices of the Church and its doctrine, including the possibility of miraculous cure" (18).

Various scholars use different models depending on their personal beliefs or approaches, as well as their area of study. Instead of subscribing to one model, I will use a combination of the cultural and religious models and the term 'disability' will be used very broadly in this thesis. When I refer to disability, I will be including both the reality and the stigmatization of a person's body or behaviors – as it is within the cultural model. As Wheatley expresses, by virtue of examining disability within the Middle Ages, it is also necessary to consider the religious dimension, particularly because I am focusing on the connection between disability and sin (18). On occasion, I will explicitly distinguish between impairment and disability, when necessary. My use of the social model will be limited but useful when discussing the stigma towards a person versus the true bodily variation of an individual. The majority of the time, however, I will be using the cultural and religious models.

One's experiences with disability are often informed by their other identities, such as race, gender, and class. I occasionally mention the intersectionality of identity, but this is not the main focus of my thesis. Intersectionality refers to the interaction of two or more identities to either exacerbate or diminish the level of oppression a person experiences. During Section 5 I explain a possible connection between disability and gender when examining elderly women in comparison to the Reeve. In this instance, elderly women face more discrimination than elderly men. Though I do not focus on the intersectionality of various identity groups in this thesis, it is

important to remember that gender, class, and race can all play a part in understanding how people with disabilities were treated in the Middle Ages.

As previously stated, the term disability will be used to indicate both the reality of an individual and the social stigma towards a person. Additionally, the term disability will reference any variation in one's body or behaviors that does not conform to the medieval standard. I use an extensive interpretation to better apply Disability Studies to the Middle Ages. I will further explain the use of the terms 'disability,' 'impairment,' and the like in the next section.

Other terms that will be utilized include 'norm,' 'ideal,' and 'stigma.' In the *Disability Studies Reader*, Lennard J. Davis writes that in order to "understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, and the normal body" (1). Davis describes that the word 'normal' makes its full debut in the English vocabulary in 1840 and the word 'ideal' enters in the 1600s (1-2). The significance behind the etymology of these two words is that, according to Davis, it impacts how disability was understood in the years and centuries before these words came into the English language. Davis explains that, "in a culture with an ideal form of the body, all members of the population are below the ideal…By definition, one can never have an ideal body" (2). Yet when we look at the concept of the norm, we are considering what the average human body looks like and then placing emphasis on the variations because the "concept of a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm" (2-3). While the concept of 'normal' did not exist in the English language, I disagree with Davis that this automatically reveals that physical impairments were viewed differently than they are in modern society. Though the system may not have been the same, the medical research, the study of physiognomy, and the stigma towards the ill and disabled suggests an expectation for the body and an awareness of how the body should look and operate. The use

of generalizations and stereotypes, particularly in reference to gender, also indicates the presence of societal expectations. The application of Disability Studies to medieval literary works proves difficult due to the lack of knowledge about the norms and expectations of societies in the Middle Ages.

The term stigma when considered in a sociological context is "a form of involuntary social deviance, signified by physical signs, that causes negative responses" (Grue 959). Jan Grue details the development of this definition as stemming from Erving Goffman, an influential sociologist, who connected stigma with deviance (959). Social deviance describes an instance when someone, physically or behaviorally, deviates from the expected norm. Stigma describes the negative responses that occur due to a perceived variance from the norm. Though the concepts of 'stigma' and 'norm' were not explicitly stated in the Middle Ages, I will utilize these terms in order to connect *The Canterbury Tales* to a modern understanding of disability.

The publication of the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* marks an important moment in the maturation of Disability Studies as a field of research. The growth of Disability Studies allows for the acknowledgement of a group and topic that is typically marginalized. Though still an expanding area of study, the application of a disability framework or lens to various aspects of life produces awareness and works towards a new 'norm.' As Grue states, "one [billion] out of the world's seven billion people" are impacted by disability (962). If one billion people in the world – 14% of the global population – experience life differently because of physical and mental variations, it seems clear that the belief in a 'norm' may be misguided. Through the discussion of disability and literature, we can work towards a culture in which people with disabilities face less stigma.

Section 2: Applying Disability Studies to the Middle Ages

According to the "Introduction" in *The Riverside Chaucer,* Chaucer worked on *The Canterbury Tales* from 1388 until his death in 1400 (Benson xxiv). These years place Chaucer's work in the late Middle Ages, which ends circa 1500. I will, therefore, apply Disability Studies to a depiction of life in the late Middle Ages, using *The Canterbury Tales* as my body of evidence.

There are several logistical and conceptual challenges that come with implementing a newly developed area of study within a medieval context. One of the obstacles stems from the lack of terminology that extends across the time periods. Edward Wheatley expresses this sentiment in his chapter in the *Cambridge Companion.* He states:

> There is a certain degree of linguistic anachronism in writing about disability in medieval literature, because the term "disability" itself did not exist in English in the Middle Ages. Its absence from the language until the mid-sixteenth century meant that conceptually, medieval people would probably not have thought of people with disabilities as a group but would have differentiated among them, especially on the basis of recognizable disabilities for which terminology existed (blindness, deafness, lameness, and so forth). Recognition of less easily identifiable disabilities such as cognitive disabilities or mental illness would also have been problematic in this period because medicine as it developed through later centuries was only beginning to appear. (17)

Disability as an umbrella term did not exist in the Middle Ages. The absence of categorization serves as proof for most scholars that people in medieval Europe did not view disabilities in the same way that we do today. Though there were terms for certain disabilities, such as blindness and deafness, many variations in the body would not have been diagnosed properly, let alone

considered in the overarching category of disability. Even today, the stigma towards those with mental illness prevents diseases such as depression or schizophrenia from being recognized as disabilities. However, the lack of terminology in the Middle Ages does not negate the existence of disabilities and the misconceptions that surround them.

When considering my use of the term 'disability' in a medieval context, I decided to make it as broad as possible. Based on my interpretation of *The Canterbury Tales*, I have found that a person's body and behavior was important to socialization. A person's hair color, forehead and nose size, or leg shape was worth scrutinizing. The medical practices of the time suggested that the body and the behavior informed one another and that everything was connected. Consequently, I will discuss many types of bodily variation that are emphasized by Chaucer. Pregnancy, curable illnesses, unattractiveness, and the like, while not considered disabilities in a modern or traditional sense, will be examined as a part of the medieval system that understood one's body to be directly connected to one's personality and morality. I will refer to these as 'disabilities' throughout my thesis, with the justification that noticeable corporeal or cognitive attributes, even one's facial structure, could be stigmatized. It is important for today's readers to recognize the dangers of conflating disability with an aesthetic judgment about beauty, particularly because it could detract from the lived experience of someone who identifies as disabled. That said, my choice to include many types of acknowledged differences in *The Canterbury Tales* will, hopefully, lead to a discussion about the progress that has been made and the improvements that are still needed.

Though the concept of disability was not introduced, the use of the word "sick" was widespread. The *Middle English Dictionary* provides many definitions and citations for the word "sik" but the first listing defines it as meaning, "suffering from disease, injury or ill health; sick,

diseased, ailing; also, in a special physiological state, such as pregnancy," as well as "one who suffers from disease, injury, deafness, etc., a sick person; also, a patient." The citations provide literary instances where the word was used in this way. These citations range from the years 1150 to 1500 for the aforementioned definitions (MED). The significance of this information is twofold. The word sick was used to describe multiple physiological states and as a result, it seems to have served a similar function as word disability does today.

Referring to deafness or pregnancy as a sickness most likely connects to the belief in physiognomy, the four humors, and even astrology. The study of physiognomy examined how an individual's appearance or behaviors reflected the inner character and morality of that person. One way that this took form was through the study of the four humors. Everyone was said to have four humors, defined by the four main elements of Earth, which could cause impairments if they were not in balance. Medieval medical science, or rather, pseudo-science, focused primarily on the interconnectedness of the body and soul. One's spiritual, moral, mental, emotional, and physical health informed all aspects of the body and being. Ian Maclean provides background on physiognomy, stating that physicians in the later Middle Ages "stress the fact that the bodily signs accessible to the senses on which physiognomy depends demonstrate the interaction of soul and body, and they link this theory to the theory of temperament or complexion, according to which humoral changes affect behavior and can be perceptible to the physician's gaze and his other senses" (277-278). The rise of physiognomy enabled doctors to diagnose disabilities based on outward behavioral or physical symptoms. They could then use complexion theory and the humors to explain the cause of the disability. Physiognomy would lead to other pseudo-scientific beliefs, such as phrenology, which argued that a person's skull shape and size could determine

their inward morality. Phrenology was widely used as a tool to perpetuate racist stereotypes and to justify slavery.

Walter Clyde Curry, who wrote *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences* in 1926, examined medical treatises and statements from classical and medieval authors and then applied them to Chaucer's works. Curry's book is one of the most detailed and substantial comparisons of Chaucer's characters to the medical understanding of the time, which makes it a significant and well-recognized source for my thesis on the supposed connection between the body and morality. Curry argues that Chaucer's descriptions of the pilgrims and the characters in the tales reveal his understanding and use of medieval medical beliefs. Curry explains that "Galen and other physicians assume that there are four elements or simple bodies in creation, earth, fire, air, and water, which are thought to possess certain 'qualities'; earth is cold and dry; fire, hot and dry; air, hot and moist; and water, cold and moist. Corresponding with these four elementary qualities are the four bodily humours, namely, melancholia, cholera, phlegm, and blood" (10). The humors then work towards creating the complexions or temperaments of people, including the melancholic and the phlegmatic person (10). The balance of these humors was crucial and "[i]n health there is a just proportion of qualities or humours mingled together in the human body; in sickness there is an excess of one or more qualities" (10). As long as one's humors were balanced, then they were healthy, but the presence of a disability indicated an imbalance.

Imbalances in the humors had many causes. One prominent cause of imbalance was sin. Gluttonous or lustful behaviors were believed to impact the humors of the body, which in turn would lead to various disabilities. In this manner, sins could manifest themselves physically. In her book *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages*, Irina Metzler discusses that while disability and sin were viewed as connected,

there were also other beliefs and points of view. Biblically, the Old Testament occasionally linked sins with physical symptoms but there are "some instances of impairment [that] are mentioned without any qualifying moral overtones" (Metzler 42). The New Testament, Metzler says, focuses primarily on healing with the faith of an individual outweighing the sins that have been committed (10). She argues that the people of the Middle Ages did not inherently conclude that a disability was caused by one's sin. I agree with Metzler that there were other explanations for disability; however, the predominant belief resulted in placing blame on the person with a disability because of their sinful actions. As a focal point of my thesis, this connection will be discussed in the next chapter.

Connecting disability and morality places blame on an individual as the cause of their own condition. This can, and did, lead to stigma towards people with physiological impairments. Blaming an individual for their circumstance removes the need for compassion, or even respect, and instead invokes feelings of justice. Additionally, the logic would follow that one's level of impairment would be proportional to the amount of sinful behavior. Thus, I have observed a 'disability hierarchy' amongst the pilgrims. The disdain towards a pilgrim with a disability increases with how impaired the pilgrim is, presumably because they are believed to be especially immoral. Though Jan Grue is referring to the political realities of disability, he addresses the concept of a disability hierarchy, stating, "Indeed, there are socially perceived hierarchies in which specific impairments differ considerably in terms of prestige" (960). An example of the disability hierarchy in a modern context is the resistance by many groups to define mental illness as a disability, as I previously mentioned. I will refer back to the disability hierarchy in my examination of the various pilgrims in Chapter 2.

The application of Disability Studies to the Middle Ages provides crucial historical information regarding the progression of the treatment and stigmatization of people with disabilities. Instances of victim-blaming are still prevalent today, particularly with disabilities and diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, that have been condemned or misunderstood. Just as the modern disability lens can change the interpretation of works from the Middle Ages, I argue that *The Canterbury Tales* can help us examine the stigma that prevails today.

Chapter 2: Case Studies from *The Canterbury Tales*

This chapter focuses on the Summoner, the Pardoner, the Wife of Bath, the Cook, and the Reeve. Though the principles of medieval physiognomy can be applied to many of the characters on the pilgrimage, the five that I have selected have the most robust characterizations in regards to disability. Occasionally I will mention the characters that exist within the pilgrims' tales but they will mostly be used for comparison purposes. My focus on the pilgrims allows me to assess the interactions, behaviors, and opinions of their peers. Though *The Canterbury Tales* is fictional, the description of the pilgrims and their interactions provide a fairly realistic example of life in the Middle Ages from Chaucer's perspective.

Section 1: The Summoner

Many of the pilgrims on the journey to Canterbury suffer from various sorts of ailments, but the Summoner is so grotesque due to illness that "Of his visage children were aferd" (I 628). Scholars debate what illness has caused such deformity that his face scares children, but it is widely believed that the Summoner has contracted leprosy. In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer introduces the Summoner as follows:

A Somonour was ther with us in that place,
That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face,
For saucefleem he was, with eyen narwe,
As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe,
With scalled browes blake and piled berd.
Of his visage children were aferd.
Ther nas quyk-silver, lytarge, ne brymstoon,
Boras, ceruce, ne oille of tartre noon,
Ne oynement that wolde clense and byte,
That hym myghte helpen of his whelkes white,
Nor of the knobbes sittynge on his chekes.
Wel loved he garleek, oynons, and eek lekes,
And for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood;
Thanne wolde he speke and crie as he were wood. (I 623-636)

It would be difficult for the pilgrims to ignore his monstrous physical appearance. From his red and inflamed acne-ridden face, to the pustules and swollen eyelids that cannot be healed by anything, to his picked and blackened eyebrows and the missing hair in his beard, the Summoner is undoubtedly battling an illness. Walter Clyde Curry, in *Chaucer and The Mediaeval Sciences,* discusses medical practices and beliefs during the Middle Ages in relation to Geoffrey Chaucer's works. Curry explains that many of the symptoms that are listed in the description of the Summoner can be connected to the medieval understanding of leprosy. Curry has synthesized information about leprosy over many centuries, and he states, "In all the works of medical writers from the ancient Greek and Arabians on down to the authors who may be said to have laid the foundations of modern medicine, the general signs of elephantiasis or leprosy are found to be the same" (41). Amongst Curry's compilation of the descriptions of leprosy through the ages, the common symptoms of a bright red face, swollen lumps, and hair loss correlate with the

image given above of the Summoner (41-44). With scholars over the centuries agreeing on how leprosy manifests itself, it is likely that the Summoner has contracted the disease.

In his book, Walter Clyde Curry argues that Chaucer knew a great deal about medieval physiognomy and utilized this knowledge to create robust characters whose morals were physically on display. Based on the strong correlation between Chaucer's description of the Summoner and the descriptions of leprosy by doctors of the time, I find Curry's thesis statement to be reasonable (xxiii). At the very least, Curry's research into the cause, diagnosis, and treatment of common medieval diseases provides an understanding of how some members of the medieval community would have interpreted the characters in *The Canterbury Tales.* Curry further summarizes the diagnosis of the Summoner, stating, "[t]he small pimples…have developed into [the] great matter-infected pustules – 'whelkes whyte' and 'knobbes' – of true leprosy. His eyebrows have nearly all fallen out, and in place of them there is discovered a scabby, scurfy mark of black color…His eyes are swollen and inflamed to a violent red, and the lids, already deprived of lashes, are enlarged and corrugated" (44). These symptoms and characteristics would have led an audience in the Middle Ages to view the Summoner as a leper because they correlated with the medical descriptions of leprosy. His condition has progressed so much so that his face is swollen and puffy and he has lost most of his hair, from his beard to his eyelashes. In "Medieval Leprosy Reconsidered," Timothy Miller and Rachel Smith-Savage state, "In its most extreme form, leprosy causes skin lesions and raised tumors, disfigurement of the face, and even loss of fingers and toes" (16). The Summoner still has his fingers and toes as far as the reader is told, but the hair loss, the bumps, and the swelling of his face point towards leprosy.

Leprosy was a disease that was highly stigmatized in the Middle Ages because of its perceived connection to sin. Leprosy is contracted in a similar fashion to the common cold and is caused by the bacterium, *mycobacterium leprae,* which was discovered by Armauer Hansen in 1873 (Miller 16). A source of stigma towards those with leprosy, however, stems from one medieval misconception that a person contracted leprosy through promiscuous sexual behavior. Miller and Smith-Savage discuss the history of leprosy and show that there were many different believed causes of leprosy throughout the Middle Ages, including the belief that "God had sent this disease to punish [people]" (21).

Curry presents Bartholomaeus Anglicus as the first to suggest that leprosy "'commeth of fleshlye lyking, by a woman soone after that a leprous man hath laye by her'"(qtd. in Curry 45). Chaucer would have been well acquainted with the concepts in Bartholomaeus Anglicus's encyclopedia, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, because Bartholomaeus's encyclopedia "was well known by 1280 and used as an authority" (Se Boyar 176). *De Proprietatibus Rerum* is divided such that the "earlier books are devoted to theology, while the last part of the encyclopaedia deals with science in its relation to theology" (Se Boyar 180). Bartholomaeus's encyclopedia connects the science of the time with Christian doctrine. Leprosy was particularly stigmatized during the Middle Ages for being directly related to one's sins. Moreover, the clues about the Summoner's sexual activities would make it likely to a medieval reader that he is answering for sexual transgressions. In the *General Prologue*, the Summoner is said to be as "lecherous as a sparwe" (I 626). According to the "Explanatory Notes" found in the *The Riverside Chaucer,* "[t]he sparrow's association with lechery dates back to antiquity" (Benson 823). The comparison of the Summoner to a lecherous sparrow immediately precedes an additional detail that implies licentiousness. The Summoner is said to have "scalled browes blake" (I 627). George B. Pace in

"Physiognomy and Chaucer's Summoner and Alisoun" explains that only two characters in *The Canterbury Tales* described as having black eyebrows are the Summoner and Alison in the *Miller's Tale* (418). Alison, a young girl that has married an old carpenter, "hadde a likerous ye,/ Ful smale ypulled were hire browes two,/ And tho were bent and blake as any sloo" (I 3244-3246). Pace states that, "the coincidence of brow color in such disparate characters might be dismissed as irrelevant if the Summoner and Alison did not share the specified character trait – lecherousness. The combination black brows and a lecherous nature would seem 'suspicious' physiognomically" (418). Additionally, the trait of lecherousness and the physical description of black eyebrows are mentioned within the same sentence for both characters. The Summoner and Alison are described as promiscuous and their blackened eyebrows serve as physical signals of their sinful sexual desires. Between the black eyebrows and the use of the sparrow in the *General Prologue*, Chaucer was explicit in his characterization of a wanton Summoner.

Sexual encounters were not the only way in which it was thought one could contract leprosy. Consumption of various food and drink were believed to lead to harmful diseases, such as leprosy. The Summoner enjoyed "garleek, oynons, and eek lekes,/ And for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood" (I 634-635). His diet consists mainly of food that worked as aphrodisiacs or exacerbated various medical ailments, according to medieval physiognomy. Walter Clyde Curry discusses the medical beliefs of the time, stating:

> Chaucer has indicated, moreover, the two principal causes of the disease: the Summoner is 'lecherous as a sparwe,' and is accustomed to eating of onions, garlic, and leeks and to the drinking of strong wine red as blood. The rascal is either criminally ignorant or foolishly indifferent. He might have learned from any physician of his time, or before, that leprosy may be contracted by illicit association with women infected with it…that

> garlic, onions, and leeks produce evil humours in the blood, and that red wine of all others is the most powerful and heating of drinks. (45)

The reader's first introduction to the Summoner in the *General Prologue* reveals that he engages in multiple activities that allegedly result in leprosy. In regards to his diet, the food and drink that he consumes are believed to perpetuate the symptoms of leprosy. The Summoner enjoys drinking red wine and eating foods rich with garlic, onions, and leeks. The Summoner's diet is a direct reference to Numbers 11:5-6 in the Bible, when the Israelites are complaining to Moses about their experience fleeing from Egypt. They reminisce, stating "[w]e remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free cost: the cucumbers come into our mind, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic. Our soul is dry, our eyes behold nothing else but manna." (Douay-Rheims, Num. 11:5-6). In connecting the Summoner to these three specific foods in Numbers, there is a parallel drawn between the Summoner and the Israelites who miss the rich foods of Egypt and the manna that can sustain them but does not hold the same earthly, hedonistic appeal. Choosing the rich foods, the Summoner's problematic behavior raises questions regarding his desire to get better or his knowledge of the medical science of the time. He continues to act immorally, eat foods that are viewed as overly decadent, and engage in sexual activities. Hair loss with leprosy indicates an advanced stage of the disease, which emphasizes the idea that the Summoner's behaviors are not conducive to his long-term health or recovery (Curry 38). He has neglected to take care of himself as shown through his advanced condition.

Chauncey Wood, in "The Sources of Chaucer's Summoner's 'Garleek, Onyons, and Eke Lekes,'" writes about how various scholars interpreted the description of the Summoner's eating habits. Curry explained that the foods themselves worsened leprosy because they upset the humors in the blood, Thomas J. Garbáty describes it as "secondary syphilis," and Professor D.

Biggins suggests that the problem with onions and garlic was due to their reputation as aphrodisiacs (Wood 240-241). In connection to Numbers 11:5, R. E. Kaske believes "that the close correspondence between the Summoner's 'garleek, oynons, and eek lekes' and the leeks, onions, and garlic of Num. 11:5…establishes at least the strong probability that Chaucer is using this detail to deepen an already ugly picture of spiritual as well as physical deformity" (Kaske 483). Regardless of if these foods were viewed as aphrodisiacs or spiritually disruptive, the consumption of garlic, onions, and leeks only contributed to the stigma towards the Summoner. The negative opinion of the Summoner would have been further exacerbated if they agreed that these foods encouraged sexual desires and that his leprosy had stemmed from a sexually transmitted disease. He continues to indulge in these foods and his illness only gets worse. It is not difficult to see how the erroneous medical beliefs of the time led to the understanding that one brought disease and disability upon oneself. They knew very little in regards to what truly caused the various diseases and ailments that people faced. Combining misunderstood pathology with a highly religious society led to a general assumption that there had to be a correlation between one's spiritual actions and one's physical body.

The particularly disturbing body of the Summoner may indicate a truly horrific and immoral character. The Friar expresses an extreme disliking for the Summoner, that focuses on the Summoner's immorality. The Friar's description in the *General Prologue* states that:

> He knew the tavernes wel in every toun
> And everich hostiler and tappestere
> Bet than a lazar or a beggestere,
> For unto swich a worthy man as he
> Acorded nat, as by his facultee,
> To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce. (I 240-245)

The Friar knows the taverns better than any "lazar," or leper, and yet if he were to have any acquaintance with a leper it would be damaging to his reputation. The reader is then told that "Curteis he was and lowely of servyse;/ Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous./ He was the beste beggere in his hous" (I 250-252). The Friar is a virtuous beggar who knows the best spots in town to make money. Yet, his own actions do not encourage any goodwill towards the Summoner, who is both a professional rival and a leper. The noble Friar decides to target the Summoner with his tale because "'[t]hat of a somonour may no good be sayd'" (III 1281). He makes it clear that he intends to disparage the Summoner's profession, but the Friar's personal vendetta is emphasized by the glaring looks he gives the Summoner (III 1266-1267).

The story that the Friar tells follows a corrupt summoner who ends up in Hell because of his actions. The beginning of the tale includes scathing opinions towards summoners and their business in handing out of false summonses and taking bribes to make the false accusations go away. The Summoner objects once the tale begins, but he is immediately silenced by the Host. The summoner in the *Friar's Tale* is said to be a "theef, and eek a somonour, and a baude," with the implication that he operates a prostitution ring (III 1354). Eventually, this summoner comes across a corrupt bailiff, who also uses extortion in order to make a profit (III 1429). The two work as a team, and continue to work together even after the bailiff reveals that he is actually a demon from Hell. The pair attempt to get money from an old woman by accusing her of adultery, but she swears that she has never cheated and she curses the summoner. As a result, the demon gains full control over the Summoner's body and tells him, "Thy body and this panne been myne by right./ Thou shalt with me to helle yet tonyght" (III 1635-1636). The end of the tale results in a plea for the pilgrims to "prayeth that thise somonours hem repente/ Of hir mysdedes, er that the feend hem hente!" (III 1663-1664). By asking for the Summoner to repent, the Friar is

suggesting the Summoner has the option to cure himself. Through repenting, the Summoner could rid himself of leprosy. According to the Friar's plea, not only are sin and disability connected but one has the choice to repent and remedy their disease.

The furious Summoner wastes no time in retaliating, and starts on his own tale about a corrupt Friar. Yet, even the corruption presented in the *Summoner's Tale* does not match the appalling visual of summoners and demons working together to steal from the poor and the elderly. The underlying accusation is that summoners are so morally bankrupt and evil that they can easily partner with demons. Knowing that illnesses, particularly leprosy, were seen as punishments for sins, the information gathered about the Summoner indicates that the deformed and terrifying exterior correlates with a monstrous and immoral interior.

The Summoner's profession, his promiscuity, and his diet are all viewed as explanations for his extreme case of leprosy. He continues to engage in these activities, which contributes to his peers' beliefs that disabilities are brought onto oneself. However, their understanding of the pathology of leprosy is incorrect. In "Medieval Leprosy Reconsidered," it is stated that many people "possess a natural immunity to the disease. Thus, leprosy does not sweep through a society killing millions in a few months. It affects only a small number of people (five to ten percent of the population) whose bodies cannot resist *mycobacterium leprae*" (Miller 17). Leprosy, then, would be harder to contract than the common cold and has little to do with one's sexual partners or diet. The stigma persists in part because they see the Summoner behaving immorally according to Christian principles and in part because of misguided medical science that indicates that his actions must have caused his illness. It is possible that the Summoner contracted leprosy during a sexual encounter, but he may have also been exposed simply by breathing in air where the bacteria were present. Without the facts regarding the true

pathogenesis of leprosy, physiognomy and the immoral behaviors of an individual are used in order to explain the presence of a disease. Not only do the pilgrims want to avoid the Summoner because they believe leprosy to be contagious, but they also believed that he had brought the leprosy upon himself, due to his immorality.

Section 2: The Pardoner

The Summoner and Pardoner have been paired by Chaucer in the *General Prologue.* They are friends who share similarities within a disability context. They both face scrutiny for their immorality and physical body. Another similarity between the Summoner and the Pardoner lies in difficulty of diagnosing the two. There is widespread discussion regarding the exact nature of the Pardoner's disability, or if he has one at all. Yet, most of the speculation points towards a variance in terms of sexual-orientation and identity with a particular emphasis on the corporeal. The lack of certain markers of masculinity in conjunction with the various jokes and jabs that the pilgrims make towards the Pardoner suggest that his peers were aware of how he varies from the medieval norm.

One possible explanation revolves around the Pardoner as a eunuch:

> This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,
> But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex;
> By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,
> And therwith he his shuldres overspradde…
> A voys he hadde as small as hath a goot.
> No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
> As smothe it was as it were late shave.
> I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (I 675-678, 688-691)

The Pardoner's high voice and lack of facial hair are the most notable characteristics. The

narrator details his physical description in the *General Prologue,* taking care to point out some of his effeminate qualities. The last line of the excerpt above is frequently discussed in critical analyses of the Pardoner. Here, he is being compared to a gelding, or a castrated horse, but also defined as a "castrated man, a eunuch; [or] a naturally impotent man" (MED). Though this image is fairly explicit, scholars debate whether this was meant to be a metaphorical jab or a literal description. Taken literally, the Pardoner would be a eunuch.

Walter Clyde Curry compiled descriptions of eunuchs throughout the Middle Ages and believes that the Pardoner was born as a eunuch, rather than castrated later in life. Being a congenital eunuch holds more stigma than those who have been castrated. The difference between a congenital and castrated eunuch is that the former is believed to be a product of an evil and sinful conception and the latter is not. Being born of sin, Curry says that eunuchs by birth were viewed as being "provided by nature with a warped mind and soul, [who] is compelled to follow the urge of his unholy impulses into debauchery, vice, and crime. Being an outcast from human society, isolated both physically and morally, he satisfies his depraved instincts by preying upon it" (70). Curry continues by saying that "Chaucer, the artist and man of deep human sympathy, has shown by the infinite care with which he has developed the Pardoner's character that he is able to appreciate, without judging too harshly, the point of view of even a *eunuchus ex nativitate*" (70). Chaucer's sympathy towards the Pardoner is debatable. Curry expresses his opinion that Chaucer is a man of great sympathy, but Chaucer's descriptions of the Pardoner indicate otherwise. Although Chaucer does not express a harsh condemnation towards people with disabilities, he does not portray the Pardoner in a flattering way. The Pardoner is corrupt in his handling of relics and pardons, often taking advantage of naïve Christians. The Pardoner is not a particularly sympathetic character morally, but the stigma against him seems

extreme when one considers the general lack of morals amongst the pilgrims. The difference exists in his physical reality; much like the Summoner, the Pardoner's physical body and spiritual soul are connected.

The Pardoner's physical body and soul cannot be examined without discussing his profession and his relics. Pardoners worked for the Church and were licensed to sell pardons for people's sins. In addition to providing pardons for sins that had already been committed, they would occasionally offer pardons in advance for sins that people expected to commit. The Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales* has relics in his possession. As Robyn Malo explains in "The Pardoner's Relics (And Why They Matter the Most)," the relics are a crucial part of the Pardoner's characterization particularly because "[o]f the forty-five lines allocated to describing the Pardoner…Chaucer devotes no fewer than eighteen lines to describing the Pardoner's relics" (82). Malo elaborates on the different types of relics that are available and the significance behind the use of false relics. Relics were categorized as either notable or non-notable and typically consisted of either major or minor body parts of saints or objects that were once owned by the saints (84-85). One reason that people wanted to interact with relics was the belief that a relic could connect one to the saint and provide physical, mental, or spiritual healing. Malo focuses on the Pardoner's possession of relics and the power that accompanies them. Malo notes that, "the Pardoner, no matter his state of sin, always has the 'power' to access his relics. The pilgrims, on the other hand, are at the mercy of a corrupt relic custodian whose conditions dictate whether they will have any 'power' to access his relics at all" (95-96). Despite the belief in the connection between one's physical body and one's spiritual health, the Pardoner is allowed to hold the position of a relic custodian. He is the protector of an earthly link to the saints and can provide a form of salvation and redemption, and yet he was also believed to be inherently

immoral.

Carolyn Dinshaw suggests that the Pardoner attempts to compensate spiritually and physically for his disability through the relics that he possesses as a pardoner. The relics are argued to provide the Pardoner with confidence and power based on where he places them. The pardons that the Pardoner has are resting "biforn hym in his lappe" (I 686). Carolyn Dinshaw suggests that "the Pardoner's documents and bulls, placed conspicuously in his bulging 'male,' present an iconographic substitute for his own lacking genitals (573). Dinshaw's image of compensation reveals more about the Pardoner's disability, as he can use the relics, pardons, and bulls that he possesses to play a dominant role in a spiritual aspect of life.

The interpretation of the Pardoner as a eunuch, however, is not universally agreed upon. Lee Patterson is one author who suggests that the Pardoner is not a physical eunuch and that the images act as metaphors for the Pardoner's character. Patterson argues for a symbolic interpretation that suggests that he is neither "physically maimed nor that his sexual habits make him a social outcast but that he is to be understood as spiritually sterile" (664). Patterson claims that the Pardoner is Chaucer's way of examining the tension between the Lollards and the Roman Catholic Church in the 14th century. This tension would lead to the Protestant Reformation that took place two centuries later. Patterson states that Chaucer would not "have described himself as Wycliffite or Lollard…but that it interested him as a topic for poetry – as did most things in his world – is undeniable" (664). The Pardoner's profession was condemned by the Lollards because the pardons are "spiritually ineffective," claiming instead that "the only form of pardon worth having is God's, which can be received only through grace and, especially, contrition" (665). The selling of indulgences removes the need for repentance and gives God's grace a monetary price and implies that humans, and the immoral Pardoner, have the same power

as God. Patterson's interpretation, however, contributes to the narrative that disability and morality are intertwined. By stating that Pardoner's physical description was a metaphor for his inner spiritual life, Patterson operates on a similar assumption as the people of the Middle Ages. He provides a modern example of the belief that the outward body can reveal information about the inward spiritual life. Disability used as a metaphor in this way can be damaging because it detracts from the lived experience of an individual, it dehumanizes the impairment being discussed, and it implies that there are larger meanings for various physiological conditions.

Elspeth Whitney considers both the physical and spiritual aspect of the Pardoner's description. Her argument is compelling due to its versatility, its basis in medieval physiognomic principles, and how it takes into account the various explanations for the Pardoner's physical appearance. In "What's Wrong with the Pardoner? Complexion Theory, the Phlegmatic Man, and Effeminacy," Whitney states:

> The Pardoner's failings are both physical and moral, and reading his portrait in complexional terms reveals an underlying logic connecting his physical appearance to his character, even as it underscores the ambiguities of his condition. Rather than closing down possible ways of understanding the Pardoner, understanding him as a phlegmatic opens up the possibility of a number of different yet overlapping and fluid diagnoses of the Pardoner's sexual and personal identity. (360)

Whitney's theory that the Pardoner was intended to be seen as a phlegmatic man corresponds with the physiological understanding of the four humors and the Pardoner's body and behaviors. The benefit to Whitney's interpretation is that it is not limiting. Towards the end of her article, Whitney shows how the Pardoner could be both a phlegmatic man and a eunuch (378). Many of the Pardoner's physical attributes, including his thin hair, lack of beard, and femininity align

with a cold complexion (360-361). In addition to the physical attributes, the Pardoner's sexual orientation was also supposedly connected to his phlegmatic complexion. Whitney states that "the cold and moist complexion, in which excess moisture produced by the digestive process was not tempered by an appropriate degree of heat, produced forms of nonfunctional or nonreproductive sexuality: impotence, lack of desire, nocturnal emissions, same-sex desire, or insatiability" (381). Depending on the scholar or the reading, the Pardoner has been associated with all or some of the listed forms of 'nonreproductive' sexuality. These desires, behaviors, thoughts, and physical events were all thought to be related to the internal balances of the body. As a result, a person's "[b]odily conditions directly influenced [one's] propensity to sin" (Whitney 365). This belief could explain why children ran from the Summoner; the physical body was a direct indication of one's morality and vice versa.

Another interpretation comes from John M. Bowers, who argues that the reader should focus more on the presence of an alcohol addiction. In "'Dronkenesse is Ful of Stryvyng': Alcoholism and Ritual Violence in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, Bowers suggests that the Pardoner's alcoholism produces similar lascivious effects as the Summoner's consumption of garlic, onions, and leeks. He argues that the Summoner and the Pardoner are more than just friends, but rather that they are sexual partners. As a transition between their introductions in the *General Prologue*, it is stated that alongside the Summoner "rood a gentil Pardoner/ Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer,/ That streight was comen fro the court of Rome./ Ful loude he soong, 'Com hider, love, to me!'/ This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun" (I 669-673). The pilgrims are undoubtedly good friends; it is their status as lovers that is left to interpretation. Though the phrase "stif burdoun" is glossed by *The Riverside Chaucer* to mean "strong bass," the explanatory notes suggest an alternate play on words where burdoun is "taken

to mean staff or phallus" (Benson 34, 824). Bowers uses the secondary meaning to construct his argument. Along with Whitney's discussion on complexion theory that suggests that excess phlegm in the body could produce same-sex desires, the concept of the Summoner and the Pardoner is viable (360-362). A romantic relationship between the two, however, does pose problems when considering the Summoner's illness. Bowers states that, "the irrationality of a sexual relationship with a partner known to be carrying a sexually transmitted disease suggests a behavioral model whereby the suicidal pattern of alcoholism is synchronized with the self-destruction of erotic pursuits, so that we may identify an extension of the death-quest into the area of the Pardoner's sexual life" (769). The frequency and amount of alcohol that the Pardoner consumes leads Bowers to identify a self-destructive pattern in the Pardoner. Despite the historical and practical prevalence of ale, due to its longer shelf-life, the Pardoner's drinking habits go beyond normal need-based consumption. He drinks copious amounts of alcohol, slowly destroying his body day after day. The possibility that the Pardoner is having sex with the Summoner in conjunction with his drinking habits, points to a sort of desire, according to Bowers, for self-destruction.

Whether the pilgrims viewed the Pardoner as a eunuch, as gay, or as an alcoholic, the Pardoner is perceived as different and is ridiculed. He receives a great amount of scorn at the end of his tale, with a harsh jab from the Host who exclaims, "by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,/ I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond/ In stide of relikes or of seintuarie./ Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;/ They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!" (VI 951-955). The Pardoner is silenced after this attack. The Host threatens to cut off the Pardoner's testicles and taunts him by saying that he will help him carry them. The Host draws attention to the effeminacy of the Pardoner by directly addressing the Pardoner's perceived disability. The

Pardoner remains silent in anger. It is the Knight who tries to alleviate the tense situation "[w]han that he saugh that al the peple lough" (VI 961). In this unique moment, we see a pilgrim putting a stop to the laughter and ridicule. The damage has still been done, however, and the laughter from the other pilgrims suggests support for the Host's cruel words.

Though the Pardoner's status as a eunuch and the presence of an alcohol addiction is debated, Chaucer provides a clear picture of the Pardoner's immoral practices. The Pardoner uses fake relics to take advantage of unsuspecting Christians. The irony is that while working as a pardoner to forgive the sins of others, he is sinning. According to medieval physiognomy, the Pardoner may not be able to entirely control his actions if he was born as a eunuch. Even if he is not a eunuch, the disturbances in his humors correlate with his morality. As a result, Chaucer presents another character who is both disabled and immoral. The treatment of the Pardoner differs from the Summoner because of the unusual moment with the Knight who offers a sympathetic viewpoint with his intervention. Chaucer uses the Knight to critique the Host's cruel treatment of the Pardoner. He indicates that though there may be a connection between morality and disability, the taunting and mocking of people with disabilities is not justified.

Section 3: The Wife of Bath

The Wife of Bath, also known as Alison, has been studied and analyzed for centuries. Her opinions, actions, and beliefs are often examined in an attempt to declare Chaucer as either a feminist or as fitting into the misogynistic mold of the Middle Ages. Alison's importance for this thesis revolves less around her potential status as a feminist symbol and more about her deafness. Edna Edith Sayers discusses the logistical challenges of writing about a character who is deaf because typically authors use verbal dialogue and communication for their characters to interact.

Because of these challenges, Sayers raises a significant question: "why make her deaf at all?" (Sayers 88). In the past, Alison's deafness has been explained as a literary tool or symbol; her deafness acts as a metaphor for her lack of general understanding or refusal to listen to the patriarchal rhetoric (86). Though Sayers also argues that the Wife of Bath's deafness is metaphorical, she acknowledges that the description of Alison was not meant to be entirely symbolic. Sayers discusses Chaucer's depiction of Alison stating that, "Chaucer is creating neither the angel nor the outcast that we are accustomed to see in modern portrayals of disabled characters, neither a villain nor a 'testimony to the human spirit'…The Wife is comic…We smile at her swagger, her cheek, her utter shamelessness, while we ponder the earnest themes that Chaucer puts forward in her monologue" (88). None of the pilgrims are completely evil sinners or paragons of perfection. Rather, they are sinners in some aspects of their lives while successful in other aspects. When considering the Wife of Bath's disability it is important to note that Chaucer did not accidentally make the Wife of Bath deaf in one ear; he was intentional with his writing and he chose to create a strong female character with a disability. The Wife of Bath questions the reader's understanding of marriage, femininity, and power and the pilgrims and the reader listen to her despite her impaired hearing.

The Wife of Bath is a unique character on the pilgrimage, in both her personality and her disability status. The reader is immediately alerted to her deafness in the *General Prologue*, as the narrator states, "[a] good Wif was ther of biside Bathe,/ But she was somdel deef, and that was scathe" (I 445-446). The knowledge of her partial deafness and her disability being qualified as negative in any way are the details that comprise the reader's first impression of the Wife of Bath. Sayers emphasizes that the introduction holds importance because "[t]here is no other instance in *The Canterbury Tales* of any physical feature being expanded from a mention in a

General Prologue portrait into narrative in a later link passage" (84). Chaucer's descriptions in the *General Prologue* are often relevant to the overall portrayal of a character, but the repetition of this detail signals to the reader that Alison's disability is important.

In terms of her deafness, Alison explains that she is deaf in one ear because of her fifth husband, Jankyn. The Wife says, "[b]y God, he smoot me ones on the lyst,/ For that I rente out of his book a leef,/ That of the strook myn ere wax al deef" (III 634-636). The Wife angrily tears a page from Jankyn's book of wicked wives. His book includes famous women who have murdered or cheated on their husbands and expresses anti-female sentiments with the use of Eve as the reason for the "los of al mankynde" (III 715-720). The young clerk whom she has married reads from this book endlessly and has a very negative opinion of women (III 706). One night she stops him from reading his book by ripping a page out while he is reading and hitting him so that into the "fyr he fil backward adoun" (III 793). He retaliates by hitting her so hard that she lies unconscious and loses hearing in her ear. Her impairment is due to physical abuse within her marriage, which to the modern mind contradicts the medieval belief that morality and disability were connected. It was not her sins that brought about her disability but rather the sins of her husband for beating her. Yet, a medieval audience may have found her responsible for her deafness because of her extramarital affairs and her role in instigating the situation.

Notorious for her sensual and lustful personality, the Wife of Bath has a reputation for indulging in her desires. The marriage between Jankyn and Alison starts immediately after her fourth husband's death, making it likely that Alison was not faithful to her fourth husband. She mentions that her fourth husband was out of town which allowed her some time to herself to explore, visit, and chat freely (III 548-562). Her concerning behavior at her fourth husband's funeral adds to the image of her as an adulterer when she states, "I wepte but smal, and that I

undertake/…And Jankyn, our clerk, was oon of tho./ As help me God, whan that I saugh hym go/ After the beere, me thoughte he hadde a paire/ Of legges and of feet so clene and faire/ That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold" (III 592, 595-599). The Wife of Bath is far from distraught as she ogles Jankyn before they have even buried her fourth husband.

One of Jankyn's reasons for reading about unfaithful women and doomed marriages could easily stem from a suspicion that Alison is cheating, or will cheat, on him. He also fears the control that some wives have over their husbands, through cuckolding or even murder. By ripping pages from his beloved book and strongly disagreeing with its sentiments, the Wife of Bath asserts her dominance in the relationship, while potentially admitting to her inconstancy. His horrified reaction after he knocks her out leads to a shift in their marriage. When Alison comes to, he says "'Myn owene trewe wyf,/ Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;/ Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat'" (III 819-821). The drastic shift in his willingness to submit to Alison could indicate that he loves her or that he fears her. Alison outlived her previous husbands, detests a book that discusses murderous wives, and initiates a physical altercation with Jankin. His reaction could stem from regret and love, or it could be in response to the Wife of Bath as a sort of femme fatale figure worth fearing. Sayers describes this interaction, stating that Jankin, "kneels down to her and begs her forgiveness – whereupon she smacks him again. At last, however, they reach an incredible consensus: the Wife is to have control of house, land, and her husband's tongue and Jankin is to burn his book" (83). The Wife of Bath's need for control, femme fatale or not, and her use of violence could justify her deafness to a medieval reader. Domestic violence is a serious topic and the casualness with which it is approached throughout *The Canterbury Tales* suggests a larger problem that exists even today. As such, it is possible

that the medieval audience could view Jankyn's actions as justified in that his attack was an earthly punishment for her sins of adultery, stubbornness, assault, and potentially even murder.

On the other hand, the pilgrims are not as judgmental towards Alison, which suggests that the believed connection between morality and disability existed in degrees. Her strong personality proves irritating to some of the pilgrims, but she is not mocked in the same manner as the Pardoner and the Summoner. This makes her experience with disability particularly interesting because she does not seem to face the same scrutiny as the other characters who are sick or disabled. In fact, during the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Alison's interactions with the pilgrims who attempt to cut her off reveal her understanding of a sort of hierarchy in regards to disability. The first interruption during her *Prologue* comes from the Pardoner, to whom the Wife of Bath says, "'Abyde!...my tale is nat bigonne./ Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne,/ Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale'" (III 169-171). She has no problem putting the Pardoner in his place, and assuring him that she will tell her tale when she is ready. She is also quick to point out his love for ale, jabbing at his potential alcohol addiction described in the previous section. She is not to be rushed, but rather she quotes Ptolemy, emphasizing that her warnings regarding marriage need to be heeded (III 180-182). True to her character, but contradictory to the social and gender hierarchy of the time, Alison can easily silence the Pardoner. Her success in quieting the Pardoner suggests that other identities can contribute to social interactions. Although she is a woman, she can reprimand the Pardoner presumably because of the differences in their disability status. Alison's social credibility is greater than that of the Pardoner because of how stigmatized being a eunuch was in comparison to her partial deafness. As a result, she is not deterred by the Pardoner, but rather continues her lengthy prologue.

The Wife of Bath is interrupted again at the very end of her prologue. Just as Alison states that she is finished and ready to begin her tale, the Friar chooses to laugh and comment on the length of her prologue (III 829-831). The Summoner uses the Friar's interruption as an opportunity to pick a fight and the Host has to intervene in order to keep some semblance of peace. The Wife of Bath's reaction to the men at the end of this ordeal points to her understanding of her place in a sort of able-bodied hierarchy. She demurely and complacently states, "'Al redy, sire,' quod she, 'right as yow lest,/ If I have licence of this worthy Frere'" (III 854-855). She is not caustic towards the Friar or the Host and even takes it a step further in asking for permission from the Friar to tell her tale. Friars needed licenses to preach in various areas, so she asks his permission to tell her tale from him in an act of deference and recognition of his position. Her reverential response towards the Friar and the Host is completely out of character. She is typically loud and opinionated and she had no problem snapping at the Pardoner. Neither the Friar nor the Host are impacted by any illnesses or ailments as far as the reader is told; the Pardoner, however, is disabled. The man that she can challenge has a disability that is more stigmatized than her own.

Missing entirely from this interaction is the Summoner. He is not even acknowledged by the Wife of Bath, positively or negatively. He may as well not exist and she most certainly does not require his permission to tell her tale. Alison at least told the Pardoner off; the Summoner is not even worth the words. The Summoner fades into the background just as quickly as he inserted himself into the conversation. By completely ignoring the Summoner, the Wife of Bath creates a hierarchy amongst the pilgrims. She must at least feign respect towards the Host and the Friar, she can force the Pardoner to apologize and concede to her, and the Summoner may as well not exist. His status as a leper earns her the right within the disability hierarchy to shun him.

The Wife of Bath does not completely submit to her place within this hierarchy. Her complacency seems out of character until the beginning of her tale where she gets her revenge on the Friar. In the introduction to her tale, Alison discusses the fairies that used to inhabit the land until the friars came and blessed everything. Their actions banished the fairies because the mystical and the religious cannot coexist. Alison says, "'[t]her walketh now the lymytour hymself/ In undermeles and in morwenynges,/ And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges/…Ther is noon oother incubus but he,/ And he ne wol doon hem but dishonor" (III 874-876, 880-881). Alison harshly criticizes the friars by announcing that they are known to rape the maidens that they come across (III 878-881). This moment can be seen as an attempt to undermine the Friar. She has to outwardly respect him, but that does not stop her from including this damaging accusation in her tale. Furthermore, she did not need to include the detail about the Friars or the fairies for her tale to make sense. The inclusion of this detail becomes a pointed attack for her to get the last word. The Wife of Bath outwardly conforms to the rules set forth by society, but she has ways of subverting the men who are supposedly superior to her. Part of this subversion is her recognition that the Pardoner and the Summoner face more scrutiny for their sinful behaviors and lack of morals, which allows her to gain a superior position in a hierarchy outside of the traditional patriarchal context. Though she is deaf in one ear, she is not described as severely impaired, especially in comparison to the Pardoner and the Summoner who have fairly visible and highly stigmatized disabilities.

Alison may suffer from another invisible disability. Throughout *The Canterbury Tales* three facts about the Wife of Bath are addressed: she is deaf in one ear, she has had five husbands, and she is incredibly lustful. In recounting her experiences with her husbands, she is not shy about her sexual encounters. Yet, she has not produced any children. If the Wife of Bath

is unable to have children, she would share a commonality with the Pardoner. The common inability to have children could potentially explain why she acknowledges him after his interruption during her prologue, placing them closer together in the 'disability hierarchy.' In "'O Sweete Venym Queynte!': Pregnancy and the Disabled Female Body in the *Merchant's Tale*," Tory Vandeventer Pearman explains that:

> Within a gendered model of disability, it is possible to read both the inability to reproduce and the ability to reproduce in relation to disability because medieval discourses on femaleness and femininity root the defective nature of woman/Woman in the (dis)functions of their reproductive organs. Just as medieval medical texts describe the menopausal woman as flawed in her inability to purge wastes or bear children, such discourses produce pregnancy as a physical condition that hinders a woman's participation in everyday life. (34)

If the Wife of Bath is infertile, then she would be considered disabled in regards to the expectations for the female body's abilities. As Pearman describes, however, being pregnant would also categorize a woman as disabled. The pregnant woman is limited in her movement, diet, and lifestyle. The ideal state would then be a fertile woman who has the ability to get pregnant but is not carrying a child.

Even if the Wife of Bath is unable to get pregnant, this may not be a limiting disability for her. She cites Genesis at the beginning of her prologue, stating "God bad us for to wexe and multiplye" (III 28). On the surface, she is talking about the use of sex within marriage to procreate. One could not achieve the goal of producing children without having sex during the Middle Ages. Without modern medical technology, there is no way of knowing for sure that Alison is unable to get pregnant, and therefore she must keep trying. I argue that the Wife of

Bath is using this repeated line in the Bible to justify her sexual desires and appetite. She is lustful and enjoys sex, and under the guise of knowing one's duty to have children she is able to have sex as often as she wants as it is religiously justified. Her inability to conceive would also safeguard her from illegitimate children conceived out of wedlock.

The subject of Pearman's article is May, a character in the *Merchant's Tale*, who marries January but cheats on him with the young lover, Damian. Pearman argues that May's potential to have an illegitimate child is what connects the female body to the disabled body (37). Additionally, illegitimate children contribute to the connection between disability and pregnancy in the medieval context due to the belief that it would be a spiritual or physical monstrosity. Pearman explains that, "In addition to fearing a pregnant woman's imagination and appetite, male authorities also feared the pregnant woman's ability to produce and carry defective or monstrous births to term…Many medical texts refer to 'monstrous' deliveries of…babies with physical defects…blaming such births on the parents' sinful behavior, such as sexual deviancy or drunkenness" (36). The use of the word "monstrous" to describe infants whose bodies differ from the norm is loaded with negative connotations. These babies are born and immediately defined as terrifyingly abnormal, regardless of whether or not they are impaired. Again, there is a connection drawn between actions, morality, appearance, and ability. The belief that sexual deviancy leads to children with disabilities can also be used to further explain the stigma towards the Pardoner as a eunuch by birth. The emphasis, however, falls primarily on the woman. Because she can, or cannot, get pregnant, the female body poses the most risks in a reproductive sense. The blame also falls on her ability to give birth to children with defects. The Wife of Bath's lack of children and May's potential for an illegitimate pregnancy are both disabilities that threaten the patriarchal hierarchy. Chaucer reveals multiple instances of disabilities being

both limiting and empowering. Both women can use their bodies to undermine male dominance, but also face blame for their (in)ability.

The Wife of Bath is deaf, infertile, and aging and yet she seems able to do whatever her heart desires. Despite these disabilities, Alison serves as a depiction of an empowered, independent, and sexually liberated woman. Alison is strong, loud, calculated, and disabled. Time and time again, she stands up for herself. The Wife of Bath is not meant to be ignored and neither are her disabilities.

Section 4: The Cook

Chaucer's intentionality persists throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. He does not include or exclude details without reason. Understanding Chaucer's careful crafting of the tales and the pilgrims allows the reader to see the significance behind the nine lines devoted to the Cook, also known as Hogge "Roger" of Ware, in the *General Prologue*:

> A Cook they hadde with hem for the nones
> To boille the chiknes with the marybones,
> And poudre-marchant tart and galyngale.
> Wel koude he knowe a draughte of Londoun ale.
> He koude rooste, and sethe, and broille, and frye,
> Maken mortreux, and wel bake a pye.
> But greet harm was it, as it thoughte me,
> That on his shyne a mormal hadde he.
> For blankmanger, that made he with the beste. (I 379-387)

Roger is a skilled chef, evident through the list of dishes that he has mastered. He can make a nice stew and bake good pies, and is on the pilgrimage to boil the chicken. His "blankmanger,"

glossed by *The Riverside Chaucer* as "a thick stew or mousse of chopped chicken or fish boiled with rice," is said to be excellent (Benson 29).

Amongst this list of specialties, one important fact is mentioned. The Cook has an ulcer on his shin. The mention of this unsightly sore occurs amongst a list of the dishes that he has mastered. Instant concern arises when Chaucer states that it was a "greet harm" that he had the mormal on his shin (I 385). Mentioned in conjunction with the food that Roger will be preparing for the pilgrims, the presence of the sore raises questions regarding sanitation and safety.

The sore is a large enough part of Roger's character that the statement uses two of the nine lines that he gets in the *General Prologue*. Walter Clyde Curry believes the mormal, mentioned in the *General Prologue*, to be *malum mortuum.* Compiling the writings of Bernardus de Gordon, John of Gaddesden, and Lanfranco of Milan, Curry summarizes that *malum mortuum* "is caused in the first place by uncleanly personal habits, such as lack of frequent bathing and the continuous wearing of soiled clothes, by the eating of melancholic foods and the drinking of strong wines, and by the disgraceful association with diseased and filthy women" (Curry 50-51). The attention brought to the mormal on the Cook's leg would have revealed his lifestyle habits to medieval readers who were well acquainted with physiognomy. Suddenly, Roger's dishes are less appetizing when paired with the understanding that he has poor hygiene, that his diet may consist of foods that disturb the four humors, and that he engages in dangerous sexual behaviors. Additionally, Lanfranco of Milan, a medical authority during the 13th century and author of the *Science of Cirurgie,* proposes that *malum mortuum* is contagious, which adds to the unsettling nature of the Cook's condition (qtd. in Curry 49). Roger does not practice good hygiene, has a potentially contagious disease, and yet he works as a chef.

Due to the lack of true medical knowledge in the Middle Ages, *malum mortuum* does not directly translate to a disease that still exists in the 21st century. The Middle English Dictionary defines it as "[a]n inflammation or ulcer of the extremities, esp. the leg; a mormal" (MED). The ulcer does indicate a larger medical problem within the body. Harold N. Cole in "Antiquity of Syphilis with some Observations on its Treatment Through the Ages," proposes that most of the medieval diseases, including *malum mortuum,* were actually syphilis (15). When looking at the symptoms of syphilis in the Middle Ages, some of the symptoms correlate with the description of the Cook. John Frith examines the history of syphilis and describes the stages and symptoms of the disease, stating that "genital ulcers…progressed to a fever, general rash and joint and muscle pains, then weeks or months later were followed by large, painful and foul-smelling abscesses and sores, or pocks, all over the body…The sores became ulcers that could eat into bones and destroy the nose, lips and eyes" (50). Though Roger only has an ulcer on his shin, there could easily be an underlying condition. The knowledge about syphilis grew, and in the 16th century, it was described as having multiple stages. Frith states that "[t]he last phase consisted of the appearance of abscesses and ulcers…often ending with severe debility, madness or death. It was this phase of the disease for which syphilis was greatly feared, because of the disfigurement it caused and the social ostracism that ensued" (51). Though this fear and stigma occur over a century after the death of Chaucer, the presence of the ulcer on his body would have been cause for concern. Even if the ulcer is not a symptom of syphilis specifically, the attention brought to the Cook's shin and his raunchy characterization, implies that he is battling a larger disease, presumably one that is related to his actions and lifestyle.

The true affliction with which the Cook was dealing holds less bearing than the discrimination he faced due to how his peers perceived him. Regardless of the diagnosis, the

ulcer on Roger's shin indicates a lack of cleanliness and a gluttonous approach to life. During the *Cook's Prologue*, the Host grants Roger permission to tell a tale, but warns him that it must be good to make up for his business practices. The Host criticizes him, stating:

> Now telle on, Roger; looke that it be good,
> For many a pastee hastow laten blood,
> And many a Jakke of Dovere hastow soold
> That hat been twies hoot and twies coold.
> Of many a pilgrim hastow Cristes curs,
> For of thy percely yet they fare the wors,
> That they han eten with thy stubbel goos,
> For in thy shoppe is many a flye loos. (I 4345-4352)

The praise the Cook received in the *General Prologue* comes into question when the Host accuses Roger of making pilgrims ill, reheating his food, and having a shop full of flies. The accusations above may indicate that his lack of personal hygiene is not the only reason why Roger has developed a disease. In his article, "Two Notes on Chaucer," Walter Clyde Curry states, "In addition to being a filthy person of low degree, he is doubtless such a thrifty soul that he devours all the tainted meats and spoiled victuals which he cannot put off on long-suffering pilgrims" (275). While Curry assumes that the Cook eats his own spoiled leftovers, it is true that the consumption of rancid meat could easily cause health problems or stomach upset. Additionally, we see that the Cook's food has made others sick in the past, so it is feasible that it would make him sick as well. Knowing that the consumption of "melancholic foods and the drinking of strong wines" was viewed as a cause of *malum mortuum* in the Middle Ages, Roger may not be the best cook for the pilgrimage (Curry 50-51).

In addition to lack of hygiene and the consumption of spoiled food, Roger has traditionally been viewed as an alcoholic. The *General Prologue* states that he has considerable

knowledge of the ales available in London (I 382). Roger's interest, however, extends beyond the professional need to know what drinks are available. During the *Manciple's Prologue* the Cook falls off of his horse and the pilgrims state extreme drunkenness as the cause. The Manciple disparages Roger, who has fallen asleep on his horse, claiming that the pilgrims should "taketh heede, sires, of this lusty man," because Roger "dronken han wyn ape" (IX 41, 44). The comparison to an ape refers to one of the four animals that corresponded to different stages of drunkness (Benson 953). The four animals were the meek lamb, the wallowing sow, the bold lion, or the foolish ape (953). The Manciple is accusing the Cook of foolishness and believes him to be severely inebriated. The Manciple, the Host, and Chaucer the pilgrim all continue to discuss the Cook's alcohol intake with varying degrees of pity and alarm.

At the beginning of the *Manciple's Prologue* the Host realizes that a sleeping Roger has caused his horse to fall behind. The Host wakes up the Cook and asks him to tell a tale. Though the Cook starts a fabliau at the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales*, we see him being asked to tell another tale, without any indication that he had previously started one. Chaucer's *Cook's Tale* is left unfinished, yet we see the Cook brought to the foreground again. Any character could have been highlighted in this moment, but Chaucer chooses the Cook. The Manciple seems to take pity on Roger and offers to tell a tale instead, stating:

> And that oure Hoost wole, of his curteisye,
> I wol as now excuse thee of thy tale.
> For, in good feith, thy visage is ful pale,
> Thyne eyen daswen eek, as that me thynketh,
> And, wel I woot, thy breeth ful soure stynketh:
> That sheweth wel thou art nat wel disposed. (IX 28-33)

Roger's pale skin, dazed eyes, foul breath, and fatigue are noticed by the Manciple, and he offers to tell a tale instead. He uses the spotlight as an opportunity to point out just how intoxicated the Cook is and berates him for overconsumption of alcohol.

Liam O. Purdon offers a different opinion in "'And of that drynke the Cook was wonder fayn': A Reconsideration of Hogge of Ware's Drunkenness." Purdon argues that Roger's symptoms indicate a worsening in the disease that has caused his mormal, rather than alcohol addiction. In Purdon's recent revival of the discussion around the Cook, he explains that while Roger's pallor, stench, and gaping mouth are classic medieval representations of drunkenness, "these same observable symptoms are also presented elsewhere in Chaucer's works to indicate physical, emotional, or even psychological distress or illness" (206). Purdon speculates that Roger's shin needs medical attention, and that the pilgrimage has caused the mormal to worsen (212). Believing that the Cook is dealing with a different disease and not alcohol addiction changes how a reader could interpret the interaction between the pilgrims during the *Manciple's Prologue*. Purdon suggests that the Cook may have accepted more wine, not because he is addicted to alcohol, but rather because he is parched due to a fever (210). Additionally, Purdon claims:

> the general motor convulsions including Hogge's apparent waxing 'wrooth and wraw,'as well as the nodding of the head, the loss of consciousness and speech, the blacking out, and the subsequent slipping from the saddle, suggest the possibility of a serious complication like that presenting as the falling sickness. This possible convulsive seizure, combined with debilitating fatigue, parching thirst, and acknowledged sneezing and rheum…[points] more in the direction of pathogenesis than in the direction of crapulousness or even accidental overindulgence. (212-213)

If Purdon's interpretation of Rogers's symptoms holds true, then he may not make it to Canterbury. A seizure while riding horseback, an untreated fever, and an open wound make the Cook's chances of survival slim, especially considering his fellow pilgrims believe him to be a drunken reprobate. If Roger has syphilis, the ulcer indicates that he is nearing a severe and fatal stage.

Purdon makes a compelling argument, but it does not tell the whole story. I believe that the Cook does struggle with alcoholism but also has an additional disease. Though it is probable that the Cook's illness would impact his demeanor on the pilgrimage, there is a strong indication that Roger is also inebriated. Loss of consciousness and lack of coordination accompany early stages of alcohol poisoning. Whether Roger has contracted syphilis, has an addiction to alcohol, or a combination of the two, he is in desperate need of medical attention. Once Roger is lifted back on his horse, the Manciple offers him more wine telling the other pilgrims that "right anon ye shul seen a good jape" (IX 84). Despite the danger that the Cook presents to himself, and the pilgirms' suspicion that they will need to lift him back on his horse again, the Manciple's offering of more wine to Roger is malicious bordering on murderous. The lack of compassion towards a struggling addict is horrific. By enabling his drinking habits, the Manciple puts him at further risk. The Cook does not merely take a sip, but finishes the whole gourde (IX 90-91). Chaucer the pilgrim watches Roger and states that the Cook had "drank ynough biforn" (IX 89). Chaucer the pilgrim's observations remain more factual than antagonistic. Though he does not abuse Roger in the same way as the Manciple, he also fails to intervene. Chaucer's true intentions are hard to know, but his inclusion of this extended interaction between the Cook and the other pilgrims gives the topic an added importance. Chaucer the pilgrim does not ridicule the Cook but he does criticize Roger's continued consumption of wine and acts as a bystander. It is

likely that Chaucer had his own misconceptions towards people struggling with addiction, however he also brings attention to the wickedness of the Manciple and expresses more concern than any of his peers.

The odds are stacked against the Cook. With an unsightly shin ulcer and an addiction to alcohol, Roger needs to be on this pilgrimage towards healing. Yet, the way his fellow pilgrims treat him is appalling. They berate and mock Roger, despite the danger he faces with falling behind the group and falling off of his horse. Lacking tolerance and compassion, the Manciple and the Host are more concerned that they may have to lift Roger back up on his horse again, as opposed to worrying about the danger of the Cook falling (IX 63-67). The pilgrims are operating from the belief that the Cook has put himself into his situation. His food has made others sick and he is suspected of eating his rancid leftovers, he knows the ales of London better than most, and the Host even suspects that Roger and "som quene al nyght yswonke" (IX 18). Overindulgence in melancholic food and drinks and unprotected sex are understood as causes of *malum mortuum*, so Roger is treated particularly poorly.

The prejudice and mistreatment of Roger could be intensified if Chaucer based him on Roger de Ware, a real cook in London at the time. Roll A 18 of the *Calendar of the Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London: Volume 2, 1364-1381,* states that "Roger de Ware, cook, who was presented as a common nightwalker, confessed his offence and put himself on the mercy of the Court" (Roll A 18). Earl D. Lyon explains that "[a] nightwalker, by simplest definition, was one guilty of wandering about the streets after curfew, contrary to numerous ordinances, whose frequent proclamation suggests their frequent violation," and that the punishment was often worse if the offender was "involved in false dicing, wenching, fighting, or the unlawful frequenting of taverns" (492-493). Within this context, the Cook on the pilgrimage

has also been found guilty of frequently breaking the city's ordinances. His status as a criminal may contribute to the assumptions that are made about him and his illnesses. The Manciple in particular could find justification in his tormenting of Roger because of his criminal past. In fact, his place on the pilgrimage could be due to his conviction. Peter Lisca argues that Chaucer used the likeness of Roger de Ware on the pilgrimage because he would have needed a job after he admitted his guilt. The five guildsmen the Haberdasher, the Carpenter, the Weaver, the Dyer, and the Tapestry Weaver may have brought him onto the pilgrimage. It is stated in the *General Prologue* that a "Cook they hadde with hem" (I 379). The pronoun "them" could indicate the five guildsmen or the pilgrimage as a whole, but Lisca suggests that the working class guildsmen were able to hire the Cook because of his recent conviction and his personal affairs. Lisca states, "It does not seem incredible that the combination of his filthy personal habits, his rioting and drunkenness, and his contagious mormal had resulted in his being discharged from some more worthy post than cooking for these tradesmen, who have thus probably been able to engage him at a bargain" (232). The theory that Lisca provides would explain how the Cook would be working for "hem for the nones/ To boille the chiknes with the marybones" (I 379-380). Regardless of how Roger made his way onto the pilgrimage, a journey to better health and recovery may be lifesaving for Roger.

Considering the Cook's running list of sins and bad habits, including his lack of personal hygiene, his unsafe sexual encounters, his overindulgence in alcoholic drinks, his infection manifesting in a mormal, and his status as a common nightwalker, Roger's treatment fits into the morality and disability framework. He has engaged in multiple behaviors that are not only believed to cause certain infections and diseases but are also sins. As a result, he is ridiculed, taunted, and bullied. The way in which the pilgrims treat Roger reveals a lack of compassion and

understanding towards those whose behavior was perceived to cause their ailments. However, Chaucer draws attention to the horrendous actions of the Manciple. The interaction challenges the reader to reconsider their beliefs about people who struggle with alcohol addiction. Addiction remains highly stigmatized within society today. The misconception that an individual has full control over their consumption when dealing with an addiction contributes to the stigma. As a result, this disturbing scene further reveals the attitudes towards the disabled who are believed to have precipitated their own circumstances.

Section 5: The Reeve

The rivalry between Robin the Miller and Oswald the Reeve leads to the raunchiest tales told on the pilgrimage. The fabliaux told by the Miller and the Reeve are intended to slander the other and to disparage the other's profession. The drunken Miller insists on telling his story immediately after the Knight. He informs his peers that the tale will be about a carpenter, to which the Reeve – a former carpenter – objects, knowing that the Miller has nothing kind to say.

The Reeve's fears are validated with the telling of the *Miller's Tale.* Walter Clyde Curry states that "the Miller in his description of the carpenter of the Tale is drawing material from his personal observations of the Reeve" (76). Oswald readily admits that he is elderly, and the carpenter in the *Miller's Tale* is a classic *senex amans*. The tales being told between these two stem from both a professional and a personal rivalry. As such, the Reeve's old age becomes a source of ridicule.

The *Miller's Tale* tells the story of John, a carpenter, who marries a young girl named Alison. With a substantial gap in their ages, Robin says:

> This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,
> Of eighteteene yeer she was of age.

> Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,
> And demed hymself been lik a cokewold.
> He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,
> That bad man sholde wedde his simylitude.
> Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,
> For youthe and elde is often at debaat. (I 3221-3230)

Due to their drastic age gap, John keeps a close watch on his teenaged wife because he fears that she will cuckold him. His fears are justified because the reader is told that "she hadde a likerous ye," and she does end up cheating on him (I 3244). Additionally, as discussed in the section about the Summoner, she has black eyebrows which point towards lecherousness according to medieval physiognomy. Robin places the blame on John's foolishness in marrying such a young woman rather than Alison's morality. Robin states that people should only marry their equals, namely because the young and the old are typically at odds. Marilyn Sandidge explains that the generational tension stems from the effects of the Black Plague. Sandidge states, "[s]cholars have long recognized the way the Black Plague reconfigured the class and economic structures of the time, but other social values such as the concept of old age were transformed, too…the Black Plague radically changed the circumstances of the elderly during the fourteenth century" (373). The devastation experienced during the Black Plague was significant enough to change the social landscape in Europe. Some of the tension that arose was that "[y]oung men resented not only the way that property and power were kept in the hands of [the] old men, but also the way that younger women made marriages with them" (Sandidge 365). Melitta Weiss Adamson expands on this topic stating that "more old men than ever competed with young males for the pool of nubile women [and] since many of these oldsters belonged to the nouveau-riche urban bourgeoisie, they frequently won out over younger rivals" (1). Marriages between the young and

old were not a new concept, but they increased in frequency following the Black Plague which exacerbated the tension between the young and old men.

Beyond objections towards the marriage of young and old, there exists a general disrespect towards the elderly in the *Miller's Tale*. During the tale, John the carpenter is cuckolded by his young wife. Alison meets Nicholas, a student of Oxford University, and "she hir love hym graunted atte laste" (I 3290). In order to get more time together, Nicholas pretends to have a revelation that there will be a repeat of Noah's flood and shares this information with John. The three of them string tubs to the roof so that they can float on the water when it comes. In the evening, John, Alison, and Nicholas climb into their individual tubs to wait out the flood, however, the lovers plan to be together once John has fallen asleep. The elderly carpenter falls into a "dede sleep, for wery bisynesse" and Alison and Nicholas are aware of this fact because "For travaille of his goost he groneth soore,/ And eft he routeth, for his heed myslay" (I 3643, 3646-3647). His loud snoring, a common image of the elderly, allows them to safely be together, because they will be able to tell if he awakens. The lovers are not left completely alone, however, because Absolon, the parish clerk, has had his eyes on the beautiful Alison. From outside her window, Absolon begs Alison for a kiss, and she tricks him into kissing her backside. Out of anger, Absolon returns to the window and asks for another kiss, yet this time he has a hot iron tool with which he intends to strike Alison when she plays the same prank. However, it is Nicholas who sticks his bottom out the window this time and is branded by Absolon. Nicholas's cries for water are loud enough to rouse the sleeping carpenter who assumes that the flood has come and cuts his tub from the roof. With no water to float his tub, the carpenter crashes to the ground and breaks his arm in the process.

The remainder of the tale focuses on the ridicule the carpenter receives, as the neighbors flock to the scene and are told that John was caught up in a senile fear of Noah's flood. As a result:

> The folk gan laugen at his fantasye;
> Into the roof they kiken and they cape,
> And turned al his harm unto a jape.
> For what so that this carpenter answered,
> It was for nought; no man his reson herde.
> With othes grete he was so sworn adoun
> That he was holde wood in al the toun;
> For every clerk anonright heeld with oother.
> They seyde, 'The man is wood, my leeve brother';
> And every wight gan laughen at this stryf. (I 3840-3849)

In the span of 20 lines, the Miller uses the word "wood" three times. "Wood" in its various forms is an adjective that describes those who are "mentally deranged, of unsound mind, [or] out of one's mind" (MED). The elderly carpenter is jealous and gullible, but the story does not support him being mentally unsound. Yet, the town is quick to label him as senile. There is an injured elderly man on the ground and the town ridicules and laughs at him. They believe the story that Alison and Nicholas present, opting to listen to the young people in the situation (I 3831-3833). John's reputation remains tarnished and the fairly innocent elderly man ends up being the ultimate subject of mockery, rather than the lustful Absolon or the adulterous Alison and Nicholas.

Considering the rivalry between the Miller and the Reeve, the Miller's emphasis on the foolishness of the elderly can be viewed as a personal attack on Oswald as an elderly reeve. While the pilgrims are laughing at the end of the tale, Oswald is mad at the Miller. Frustrated with the likeness between John and himself and the nature of the Miller's story, Oswald states:

> But ik am oold; me list not pley for age;
> Gras tyme is doon; my fodder is now forage;
> This white top writeth myne olde yeris;
> Myn herte is also mowled as myne heris,
> But if I fare as dooth an open-ers—
> That ilke fruyt is ever lenger the wers,
> Til it be roten in mullok or in stree. (I 3867-3873)

Oswald's immediately launches into a sermon about old age (I 3861). Oswald's morbid depiction of the aging experience includes images of molding hearts and hair and rotting fruit. He explains that, much like fruit, one's body continues to deteriorate the longer that one lives. The imagery that Oswald uses evokes pity, particularly for the modern reader, as the elderly are described as slowly deteriorating. The ending scene of the *Miller's Tale* becomes more heinous with the reminder of what life looks like for an elderly man during the Middle Ages.

The Reeve continues to discuss the tendencies of the elderly. He explains that the vices of the elderly include bragging, lying, anger, and greed, yet they are not able to act on their youthful desires anymore (I 3883-3885). Oswald says, "The sely tonge may wel rynge and chybe/ Of wrecchednesse that passed is ful yoore;/ With olde folk, save dotage, is namoore!" (I 3896-3898). According to the Reeve, though they are able to discuss the follies of their past, the elderly are unable to partake in anything other than "dotage" or deterioration and "senility" (MED). Oswald's experiences as an elderly man are bleak as he paints a picture of being unable to participate in many activities, even the sinful ones. His speech does little to highlight a good moral character, but it does shed light on the frustration and hopelessness felt by an elderly man in the Middle Ages. Oswald and John are flawed but Chaucer's acknowledgement of the elderly and how easily they are discredited and humiliated challenges the reader to consider their own treatment of the older population.

The treatment of the elderly in the Middle Ages was not consistent. Ranging from respectful to resentful, the behavior towards the elderly depended upon the century, the social structure, and one's individual circumstances. Albrecht Classen states, "We can be certain that old age per se never automatically implied respect, contempt, or disregard" (33). A uniform reaction or sentiment did not exist towards the elderly. However, Pat Thane mentions that "People of any age earned respect by their actions or because their wealth and power enforced deference. Rich old people might be venerated, outwardly at least. Poor old people might be cared for by the community, or ostracized and neglected" (14).

Chaucer's death in 1400 meant that he nearing 60 years of age, which is considerably old for medieval Europe. Chaucer's own age makes the character of the Reeve intriguing. In accordance with the variety of reactions towards and treatment of the elderly, Chaucer depicts a disreputable and fairly sinful elderly pilgrim despite his own mature age. We do not get a plea from Chaucer that the elderly should inherently be respected and revered. Instead, Chaucer portrays mostly flawed elderly figures, rather than wise and respectable ones. The reader's initial introduction to the Reeve in the *General Prologue* presents Oswald as "a sclendre colerik man" (I 587). His legs are mentioned with the sentence "Ful longe were his legges and ful lene,/ Ylyk a staf; ther was no calf ysene" (I 591-592). Oswald's long and stick-like legs and slender body is evidence of his lustful and sensual desires, based on medieval physiognomy (Curry 75). Not only is the Reeve choleric and licentious, but his peers are completely unaware of his schemes and did not know "his sleighte and his covyne;/ They were adrad of hym as of the deeth" (I 604-605). Again we have an unsavory character whose body reveals his age and presumably his morals as well.

Marilyn Sandidge interprets the Reeve in a disdainful manner, stating that "this repugnant character obviously sees himself as a powerful force in control of the young people around him" (369). The Reeve is able to instill fear in others and to get away with his trickery, making him a malevolent elderly figure. Yet, both Sandidge and Classen discuss how Chaucer may be drawing attention to the tense situation by highlighting misbehavior on both sides. Classen states:

> Chaucer tends to portray old men as foolish and silly, as objects of ridicule by the young, especially when they pursue love among young women and do not discipline themselves, disregarding the ancient wisdom concerning old people's proper behavior. Moreover, the young characters definitely disregard the old and push them to the margin…This does not necessarily imply that Chaucer shared this malicious attitude; instead he signals to his readers that the young figures are to be blamed in their rash and irrational behavior and in their disregard of the counsel of the old. (74)

Classen's interpretation favors Chaucer as sympathetic towards the elderly despite his depiction of the older characters suggesting otherwise. The Reeve lacks the kind wisdom that is stereotypically characteristic of the elderly. He still tricks and cheats and instills fear in the hearts of those around him. The Reeve compares old age and himself to "fruyt [that] is ever lenger the wers,/ Til it be roten in mullok or in stree. (I 3872-3873). With Oswald's immorality and John's foolishness, the elderly in general are not portrayed in the most flattering way, but Chaucer implicates the younger characters as well. Chaucer remains consistent in highlighting the morality of his characters, and reveals the sins of both the young and the old.

The only elderly figure on the pilgrimage who is truly respected is the Knight. Sandidge discusses the age of the Knight, stating, "Although no age is given for the Knight, the dates for the battles and sieges in which he took part range from 1344 to 1386, a span of forty-two years.

Even if he had fought at Algezir, his earliest battle, as a teenager, he would now be close to sixty years old" (365). The Knight's description in the *General Prologue* claims that he "was wys" and "a verray, parfit gentil knyght" (I 68-72). Treated with respect and viewed as wise, the Knight fits well into the Christian view that one's elders deserve respect and honor. He is an upstanding member of society, with good morals and plenty of wisdom. Following the end of the *Knight's Tale*, the Host praises his storytelling ability and "In al the route nas ther yong ne oold/ That he ne seyde it was a noble storie/ And worthy for to drawen to memorie" (I 3110-3112). Both the young and the old members of the pilgrimage enjoyed the Knight's tale and wanted to remember it.

The differing opinions on the elderly in the Middle Ages can be seen on the pilgrimage to Canterbury. Overall, even if the elderly are respected or pitied, there exists a "dread of old age" (Classen 8). This dread is articulated by the Reeve and it is likely that his journey to Canterbury contains a hope that he will be able to stop or reverse the aging process. Considering that his fellow pilgrims thoroughly enjoyed the downfall of the elderly carpenter in the *Miller's Tale*, Oswald's desires for youth and health are understandable.

Old age for males does not carry the same degree of stigma as some of the other disabilities that I have discussed. However, the same cannot be said for the elderly women who are mentioned throughout *The Canterbury Tales.* Elderly women, particularly those who are unmarried, are found to be repugnant. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale* a young knight is given a year to discover what women truly want. He must find the answer or face death as punishment for raping a young woman. He comes across an old woman at the end of the tale who agrees to help in exchange for his hand in marriage. She announces that "[w]omen desiren to have sovereynetee" (III 1038). The knight's life is spared but he is devastated because of his

impending marriage to the old woman. Rather than feasting he feels "hevyness and much sorwe./ For prively he wedded hire on morwe,/ And al day after hidde hym as an owle,/ So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule" (III 1079-1082). The knight's life was saved but he feels that he cannot rejoice at all because he dreads marrying the elderly woman. The tale ends with the knight giving the elderly woman full freedom, and as a result she transforms into a beautiful young maiden. In the end, the knight escapes his dreaded fate of having to marry an older woman. The transformation of the hag reveals the Wife of Bath's own desires to be young again. In the *Wife's Prologue* she states, "'He was, I trowe, twenty wynter oold,/ And I was fourty, if I shal seye sooth'" (III 600-601). Alison was Jankin's senior by twenty years. Though she was able to find a younger man, Jankin's death has left her searching for her next husband. The Wife's fears are realized in her tale, as the young man mourns his marriage to the elderly woman. Alison knows that she cannot reverse the aging process, but wishes she could because of the undesirableness of elderly women.

The common terminology of describing elderly women as hags reveals the lack of appeal that they hold for men of all ages. Combining their appearance with an inability to conceive children, elderly women face more stigma than their male counterparts. Yet, the elderly population in *The Canterbury Tales* does not fare as well as some of the younger pilgrims. It takes very little for the elderly to be labelled as senile and cruel, and the women face the added branding of infertile and undesirable.

A similar sentiment presents itself in the *Merchant's Tale*. January, a sixty-year-old knight decides that he no longer wants to miss out on the joys of marriage. He ends up marrying the young May who eventually cuckolds him. Yet when he discusses his perfect wife, he claims, "'I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere./ She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn" (IV 1416-

1417). January desires a woman who is at least forty years his junior. He states that he has no interest in taking a wife who could not bear children, which connects back to the earlier discussion on May and the Wife of Bath. His hypocritical desire for a younger woman shows how gender can play a role in the perception of people in their old age.

The reader is presented with a spectrum, the difference existing because of the behaviors, morality, and gender of the elderly figure. The notion that people should be judged based on their actions outweighs any automatic assumptions that are present about the elderly, yet negative misconceptions are still applied to them. Chaucer has put the young and the old in conversation throughout *The Canterbury Tales.* The old are either foolish or wicked and the young are either disrespectful or cunning. Chaucer's work demonstrates a critique of unions between the young and the old, but neither party is innocent. Chaucer indicates that old age itself does not come with wisdom or folly, as shown by the Knight and the Reeve. The impairments that accompany old age, however, are still mostly determined by the morality of the individual. January's blindness and John's injury result from their insistence upon marrying younger women. Overall, old age does not fit into the medieval model that connects disability and sin, but rather an elderly person's impairments can be viewed as a reflection of their morality.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to contribute to the rapidly growing field of Disability Studies. By focusing on the Middle Ages I hoped to show that Chaucer's work could provide insight into contemporary topics. My thesis statement included three overall objectives. I wanted to examine the connection between disability and morality, explore the medieval perspective of disability –

including the presence of a 'disability hierarchy' – and consider the how the belief system of the Middle Ages could produce stigma or other long-term consequences.

The connection between sin and disability was common in the Middle Ages. The belief in the four humors created a scientific way to place blame on an individual with a disability. The misconception that disturbing one's humors through sinful behaviors could cause any form of disability led to the notion that sin and disability were linked. If a medieval reader had knowledge of physiognomy or complexion theory, the Summoner's consumption of garlic and leeks or the Cook's alcohol intake would have been cause for judgment rather than sympathy. Any understanding of the medical science at the time would have resulted in victim-blaming and a lack of compassion; their actions caused their disability. However, not all states of disability were considered to be punishment for one's sins, particularly in regards to old age. The elderly themselves were not inherently good or bad, but most of their afflictions were still reflections of their morality.

The medieval perspective on disability relies heavily on an individual's physical characteristics revealing their morality and likewise an individual's behaviors manifesting itself physiologically. This concept works to form a disability hierarchy. When placing the pilgrims in a disability hierarchy, the order would proceed with the Summoner at the bottom, the Pardoner and the Cook are a step above, and the Reeve and the Wife of Bath are towards the top. The disability hierarchy takes into consideration both the sins and the disability of an individual. The Wife's partial deafness was caused by her husband and, at most, can be seen as indirectly caused by her sinful actions. The elderly Reeve was once lecherous and continues to be wicked but can no longer act on his desires. The *Miller's Tale* suggests that he is viewed as foolish or senile. The Pardoner's immoral tendencies were viewed as consequences of his birth as a eunuch, his

castration, or the imbalance of his humors. His physical differences were believed to stem from his parents' sinful actions rather than his own, but his unscrupulous behaviors do nothing to help regulate his humors. The Cook's lack of hygiene and potential night-walking were unvirtuous choices he was making that would contribute to his ulcer. Additionally, his consumption of alcohol was viewed as something he could control, making the Cook's fall from his horse a cause for ridicule and not concern. At the bottom is the Summoner, whose continued indulgence in rich food and wine, and his status as a leper place him at the very bottom. Leprosy was highly stigmatized in the Middle Ages because the pathology was understood to be of a sexual nature. The hierarchy does not apply to all cases, but can be acknowledged in conjunction with the connection between disability and morality.

The treatment of the pilgrims with disabilities indicates the existence of some form of stigma. The Reeve is ridiculed through a tale about a foolish old man, the Cook is mocked and his addiction serves as a joke, the Wife of Bath is frequently interrupted during her *Prologue*, the Pardoner's masculinity is attacked in front of the entire pilgrimage, and the Summoner is treated as though he does not exist. All of these pilgrims are disabled in the broadest sense of the term and they face discrimination on their way to Canterbury. Connecting morality and disability allows for blame to be placed on the individual. This blame can quickly turn into prejudice and discrimination, as the community condemns immoral behaviors that are thought to result in disabilities. The belief in a connection between disability and morality is not limited to the Middle Ages. These ideas can be seen today in the form of micro-aggressions, prejudices, and discrimination. *The Canterbury Tales* provides background and insight on the ways in which this belief system has manifested itself in the past and what should be avoided for the future.

Disability status is just one of the marginalized and oppressed identities that face daily forms of prejudice and discrimination, from the personal to the institutional. In addition to exploring the medieval thoughts on disability, this thesis sheds light on the mistreatment of an underrepresented population. I hope that by creating more space for interactions between literature and disability, I have brought more attention to 14% of the global population (Grue 962). Though only five pilgrims were discussed in depth for this thesis, all of the pilgrims were headed to Canterbury for some form of healing. They had physical, mental, and spiritual ailments and a desire to be cured. The amount of people with disabilities in *The Canterbury Tales* indicates Chaucer's awareness and acknowledgement of the prevalence of physiological variations amongst people. Chaucer's work reveals that he most likely saw some validity in the medieval sciences, however, he creates a complex community that shows how much disabilities can vary amongst people. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a crucial text when discussing disability because he depicts how common disabilities are, forces the reader to consider their own disability status, and questions the stigma that arises from the belief in the connectedness of disability and morality.

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