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Premodern Perspectives, Disability Studies, and Public Writing

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Abstract

As part of a cluster of pieces on "the whole medievalist," this essay challanges conventional boundaries between academic and public writing by demonstrating how my scholarly expertise in premodern literature and culture was instrumental to the arguments and ethos of my recent book *Right from the Start: A Practical Guide for Helping Young Children with Autism*. Specifically, the essay discusses *The Ancrene Wisse* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* to reveal how medieval conceptions of rules and social non-conformity inform my writing about autism, understood as a form of life that warrants both a compassionate response from the neurotypical community and structured accommodations that support autistic people in the practice of self-regulation and self-advocacy. Even though *Right from the Start* does not explicitly say anything about early English writers, the book's most central insights — and its ethical commitments — derive from my explorations of medieval culture and its capacious perspectives on human identity, communal values, and ways of being in the world — topics that are integral to any discussion of autism today.

If you type my name into Amazon.com, I appear as the author of two books: *The Claims of Poverty: Literature, Culture, and Ideology in Late Medieval England* and *Right from the Start: A Practical Guide for Helping Young Children with Autism* (Crassons 2010; Donahue and Crassons 2019). At first glance, these two works have nothing in common, whether in terms of audience or content. This division is underlined by the traditional standards measuring their success: the guide does not count in a significant way for my standing in the university, as in a case for promotion, and my expertise in medieval studies is likely irrelevant for readers of the guide (Zaloom 2021; Ray 2017; Shalet 2016). But there is something that strikes me as artificial about this apparent gulf between scholarly work and public writing. From my point of view, *Right from the Start* is a book that reflects and extends my longstanding academic interests in ethics and human need, including the so-called special needs of autistic people.

Years of studying premodern texts have made me highly attuned to the fact that modern conceptions of normativity, including ideals of neuro-normativity, are social and historical constructs. Exploring the alterity of medieval culture has allowed me to develop a more capacious perspective on human subjectivity, communal values, and ways of being in the world — topics that are germane to any discussion of autism today. *Right from the Start*, then, is a product of my identity as a "whole medievalist." It is a work shaped at once by my experiences as the mother of two children with disabilities, my specialization in critical autism studies, and the indelible intellectual sensibilities I have gained as a scholar of premodern literature and culture. Even though *Right from the Start* does not explicitly say anything about early English writers, the book's most central insights — and its emphasis on neurodiversity — have been informed in substantive, if subtle, ways by medieval voices and perspectives.

The key intervention of *Right from the Start* is its focus on self-regulation, a topic with relevance in both the modern and the medieval world. Put simply, the book promotes the idea that autistic children, like all people, can be most receptive to learning when they are in an environment that supports their distinctive emotional and sensory needs, that helps them feel calm and secure. Self-regulation is a well-known concept in the fields of psychology and child behavior (Greene 2023; Hagger 2010; Carver and Scheier 1998; Montry 2016; Fonagy and Target 2002). It is also at the foundation of arguments by autistic people who urge social acceptance of activities like stimming. This form of repetitive behavior can help soothe overwhelming feelings and sensations or, alternatively, it can stimulate the nervous system by enhancing focus and providing increased sensory input (Tancredi and Abrahamson 2024; Kapp 2019; Nolan and McBride 2015).

But my scholarly training as a medievalist also helped me understand the significance of self-regulation, particularly when I reflected on the genre of rulebooks. These practical works, in their different monastic, fraternal, and

anchoritic iterations, proved relevant because they approach rules not in terms of authoritarianism and compliance, but as tools of regulation aimed at facilitating a certain form of life. Exploring the relationship between outward behavior and interior states, medieval works in this genre necessarily exhibit a self-consciousness about rules. Their practical guidelines have value in creating a habitus that shapes a person's disposition and cultivates a particular way of being. This medieval perspective was essential for conceptualizing the purpose and ethos of *Right from the Start* as a practical guidebook that seeks to facilitate autistic ways of being, beginning with a child's early experiences in life.

Medieval rules, of course, present detailed codes of behavior and comportment that stand out for their decidedly prescriptive character. For example, the author of the *Ancrene Wisse*, an early thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses, stresses the absolute centrality of enclosure and bodily discipline for women pursuing a particularly rigorous form of the contemplative life. As he elaborates on the outer rule, that is, the sections of the text "concerned with outward things … and how a person should behave outwardly," the author first stipulates that the space of the anchorhold must be configured to minimize the anchoress's engagement with the world beyond her cell (Savage and Watson 1991, 48). "Love your windows as little as you possibly can," he tells the anchoress, before specifying that all the windows of the anchorhold should be small, narrow, and tightly covered with a black cloth (66). The physical enclosure of the anchorhold offers a crucial layer of spiritual protection to the anchoress, for her body itself emerges in the text as a site of moral vulnerability. Discussing the human senses as potential pathways of sin, the author instructs the anchoress both to "guard [her] eyes" and to shield herself from the gaze of onlookers (67). The rule additionally forbids the anchoress from talking with visitors at length, listening to idle speech, and engaging in physical contact with others (72–86; 89–92). Encouraging a paradoxical form of life where the anchoress is dead to the world, these dictates support the *Ancrene Wisse*'s fundamental emphasis on enclosure. "Above everything that you have written in your rule about outward things," the author tells the anchoress, "I would have this point, this article about being well-enclosed, best kept" (71).

The author of the *Ancrene Wisse* also underlines the importance of the outer rule by detailing the consequences of breaking it. Any anchoress who violates the rule by, say, failing to keep her curtains tightly shut, especially in the presence of a man, will face "not one harm or two, but all the woe that now is and ever was and ever will be" (67). In an infamously harsh passage, the author draws on Exodus 21:33-34 to make a comparison between a beast that falls into an uncovered pit and a man who lusts after the anchoress upon catching sight of her. Insisting that the anchoress is culpable for the man's lecherous feelings, the author issues a warning about the fate of her soul on doomsday. "You who uncover this pit," he tells the anchoress, "you who do anything by which a man is carnally tempted through you,

even if you do not know it, fear [God's] judgment greatly" (69).

This extreme version of culpability might well give the impression that an anchoress must follow the outer rule with compulsive obedience, lest one mistake or moment of negligence set her on the path to damnation, to the "death of the soul" (70). However, the author ultimately counters such an interpretation — and mitigates the most punitive passages of the text—by explaining that the outward rules are not in place for the sake of rules, that is, they are not designed to promote an empty kind of compliance. Rather, these serve a larger spiritual or philosophical purpose, for the dictates about enclosure are meant to support the anchoress's commitment to a life focused on the contemplation of Christ. The anchoress must therefore regard the *Ancrene Wisse* with some degree of interpretive flexibility, seeing the text as a guide that can be adapted to facilitate her devotional objectives. The outer rule, as the author makes clear, "changes in different ways, according to each individual's character and capacity." "One [anchoress] is strong," he explains, while "another is not strong and may be very well acquitted and pay God with less." "One [anchoress] is learned," he continues, while "another [is] not and must work more and say her prayers in another way" (48–49). Here, the *Ancrene Wisse*'s approach to rules is especially revealing because the text explicitly grants integrity to each person's unique "character and capacity." Based on her particular needs and strengths, the anchoress works in consultation with her confessor to determine the best application of the outer rule. The ultimate source of regulation lies within the anchoress herself.

While focused on a vastly different context, *Right from the Start* aligns with medieval rulebooks like the *Ancrene Wisse* in asserting that autistic children are best served by practices and guidelines that support their fundamental capacity for self-regulation. The job of caretakers and teachers is not unlike that of the anchoress's spiritual director insofar as it involves both helping autistic children recognize their individual needs and providing support for those needs through a structured, but flexible environment. Children cannot learn or grow socially and emotionally unless they are in a relative state of calm, but autistic children tend to experience higher rates of anxiety and dysregulation (Bougeard 2021; White 2009; Van Steensel 2011). Their sensory needs alone, for example, might make certain environments hard to tolerate since autistic people can become distracted or overwhelmed by sights, smells, textures, and sounds that neurotypicals may hardly notice (Beaney 2021; Robertson and Baron-Cohen 2017; Hazen 2014). When an autistic child responds to such stimuli by, perhaps, trying to escape the situation or by seeking increased sensory input, their actions often appear to be inappropriate, impulsive, or defiant behavior in the eyes of neurotypical parents and teachers. The high expulsion rate for autistic preschoolers —1 out of every 6 students at an average age of 3.3 years — attests to the fact that these children are frequently seen as discipline problems (Blacher and Eisenhower 2022). Too often,

adults mete out punitive consequences when a child's actions are really a sign that they need help in managing difficult sensations and intense emotions. Instead of enforcing rigid behavior codes, caretakers and educators would do well to follow the spirit of the *Ancrene Wisse*, with its reminder that "all cannot" — and "ought not" — "keep to one rule" (48). Codes of conduct are valuable not as disciplinary regimes per se but as structures that affirm the fundamental integrity of the self while also shaping a particular disposition, a form of life.

Sharing this perspective, *Right from the Start* aims to help autistic children ultimately forge their own paths in the world as people who know what they need in order to feel secure and regulated in their daily lives. In addition to promoting an atmosphere of flexibility and inclusion, the book encourages early skills of self-awareness and self-advocacy, teaching children to seek effective coping tools and accommodations. Perhaps surprisingly, this focus on self-regulation and self-advocacy goes against the mainstream autism intervention known as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), a method that relies on a system of rewards and aversives to train children to mask their autistic traits so as to become indistinguishable from their neurotypical peers (Silberman 2015; Yergeau 2018). In the ABA framework, an autistic child learns to follow rules like "quiet hands" or "make eye contact" in order to mimic normative behavior and display a façade of self-regulation. ABA therefore prioritizes social conformity over a child's physiological and emotional needs (Yergeau 2018; Montgomery 2019; Bascom 2012). And, in doing so, it subjects autistic people to what David Perry (another medievalist writing publicly on disability) sees as a wider "cult of compliance," a repressive ideology imposed on the disability community as a whole (Perry 2015). But compliance prevents human beings — whether medieval anchoresses or autistic children — from becoming subjects capable of discerning and responding to their own needs as a way of living deliberately in the world.

Instead of placing the burden squarely on autistic individuals to adapt to normative social expectations, my work on autism seeks to promote more nuanced understandings of human identity and community — an aspiration informed both by recent research on neurodiversity and by medieval explorations of alterity. I see autism in terms of the neuro-diversity paradigm, which autistic scholar Nick Walker (2023) defines as follows: "The idea that there is one 'normal' or 'healthy' type of brain or mind, or one 'right' style of neurocognitive functioning, is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid (and no more conducive to a healthy society or to the overall well-being of humanity) than the idea that there is one 'normal' or 'right' ethnicity, gender, or culture." Insisting that autism is not an inherently pathological disorder but rather a valid form of personhood, the neurodiversity paradigm urges an ethos of acceptance for individuals with the condition. It also importantly reminds neurotypical people that their modes of perception are not superior to autistic ways of thinking; neurotypicals simply see the world through

the lens of neurotypicality.

The arguments of Walker and other modern disability rights advocates have been instrumental to my understanding of the neurodiversity paradigm as an ethical imperative. So too, has a medieval text like *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1996), seen as a work that interrogates the moral status of a community accustomed to pathologizing non-normative behavior. Many of Kempe's fellow Christians famously condemn her non-conformist and disruptive brand of devotion as a sign of illness, drunkenness, or satanic possession, and they often ban her from their company and places of worship. However, at a key moment of the text, an Augustinian friar defends Kempe in a way that resonates with the values of the neurodiversity movement, for he urges the community to exercise interpretive humility in the interest of forging a culture of acceptance. "'Frendys,'" he tells Kempe's detractors, "'beth stille, ye wote ful lityl what sche felyth'" (Kempe 1996, 161). The friar demands mercy and generosity from Kempe's fellow Christians by calling attention to their own epistemological limitations.

Much of my work on autism and advocacy is inspired by the friar's message of acceptance and humility. This message has continued relevance for non-autistic parents, teachers, and caretakers of autistic children—children whose behavior, like Kempe's spirituality, is often pathologized. Just as Kempe's critics were called to do, neurotypical people must learn to recognize their limited perspectives, to acknowledge the validity of autistic experiences and perceptions, even when these differ from their own. As autistic activist Jim Sinclair (2012) tells neurotypical parents of autistic children, "You're going to have to give up the certainty that comes of being on your familiar territory, of knowing you're in charge, and let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world." Here Sinclair urges neurotypical parents to let go of predetermined expectations and roles, allowing the interests and perspectives of their neurodivergent children to shape the dynamics of the parent-child relationship. His words echo the sentiment of the medieval friar when he exhorts his congregation both to suspend their judgments about Kempe and to focus instead on her feelings and unique orientation in the world. For modern-day caretakers and parents, cultivating this disposition of openness is the first step in developing a bond of trust with autistic children and laying the foundation for their future engagement and growth (Donahue and Crassons, xxiv).

In calling on caretakers and educators to prioritize self-regulation over compliance, to recognize the biases of neurotypical cognition, and to imagine more capacious forms of life, my public-facing work on autism echoes the voices of present-day disability advocates and medieval writers alike. Though premodern literature never emerges as an explicit topic in *Right from the Start*, the medieval past lies beneath the surface of the book, informing its ethical arguments and its fundamental understanding of human identity. If the book's guidance ultimately

proves to be beneficial to any parents, teachers, and children, then these same people will have also benefitted from the tacit lessons of premodern culture, from the perspective of the whole medievalist.

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