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Julie Robert, University of Technology, Sydney

Julie.Robert@uts.edu.au

Abstract

The idea of disability as divine punishment is an enduring myth that French-Canadian author Yves Thériault draws upon in his 1966 novel, *Les Commettants de Caridad*. The narratologically complex story tells of how a proud but deceitful man acquired his multiple disabilities, all the while unsettling the link between disability and punishment, divine or otherwise. Using narratological analyses, Girard's theories on violence and scapegoating, and Derridean notions of supplementarity and excess, this article suggests that Thériault's implicit project is one that mobilizes hyperbolic representations of disability and reactions to it not to shore up stereotypical uses of disability in literature, but rather to undermine

Key words

Disability; literature; divine punishment; sacrificial violence; excess; Yves Thériault; Les Commettants de Caridad; narratology; Girard; Derrida

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The idea of disability as divine punishment is an enduring myth that French-Canadian author Yves Thériault draws upon in his 1966 novel, *Les Commettants de Caridad*. The narratologically complex story tells of how a proud but deceitful man acquired his multiple disabilities, all the while unsettling the link between disability and punishment, divine or otherwise. Thériault focuses his narrative on the violence that the townspeople inflict on the man subsequent to his injuries when he takes on the role of scapegoat for the community. The human violence that surrounds the victim comes to supplement or supersede any established notions of disability as punishment in that the community's violence serves as both an addition to the allegedly divine "violence" to the body and a substitute for it. The effect of this literally "dangerous supplement" is to render the commonplace association grotesque. Using narratological analyses, Girard's theories on violence and scapegoating, and Derridean notions of supplementarity and excess, this article suggests that Thériault's implicit project is one that mobilizes hyperbolic representations of disability and reactions to it not to shore up stereotypical uses of disability in literature, but rather to undermine the persistent and problematic link between disability and punishment.

Legal frameworks tend to define disability in terms of function or impact on major life activities and concern themselves primarily with the relatively new questions arising from matters of discrimination and accommodation. Cultural understandings of disability, by contrast,

are so deeply engrained that they often undercut official statements about what defines disability. The socio-cultural frameworks in which disability operates and by which it is defined are therefore key questions of disability studies. Accordingly, Girard's tracing of the anthropological and psychological impetuses toward violence against those construed as Other and Derrida's probing of the complex relation of nature to culture—particularly as these ideas are taken up by disability scholars such as Wills, Mitchell, and Snyder—are fitting tools for understanding how stigmatizing reactions to bodily difference can themselves be used as instruments of critique.

The Cultural Nexus of Disability, Punishment and Pity

The myth of disability as punishment is embedded in the collective Western psyche and its unraveling involves scrutiny of both complex historical attitudes that, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, go back to the Bible and ostensibly secular Western cultural beliefs.[1] The link between disability and "divine will" in moral or religious models, in which "the physically different body is explained by an act of divine or demonic intervention" (Lewis xxi), endures today, albeit in fashions that are easier to ignore, for they are more understated. In the Middle Ages, for instance, Colin Barnes notes that babies born with disabilities were seen as evidence of the devil's work or witchcraft. And although such ideas no longer maintain their currency, Lewis observes how "Our perception and experience of the present moment is made possible by our considerable inheritance from the past" (xiv). Theologian Nancy Eiesland, reacts to the staying power of such notions when she signals the "persistent thread within the Christian tradition" that denotes

[1] The biblical story in which Cain slays his brother Abel and receives a visible mark upon his body for his crime is perhaps one of the most common, albeit erroneous, readings of the punitive nature of bodily difference. Likewise, the suggestion that one must endure bodily suffering for one's sins (or the sins of others) resides at the very heart of conventional interpretations of Christ's crucifixion and religious practices involving bodily mortification. Lois Keith also points out how the various disabled figures of the gospels are the vectors for divine work and how Old Testament texts, for instance Leviticus, presents contradictory views about disability that frame it alternately as punishment and cause for care.

disability as marking "an unusual relationship with God" (70). This loss of divine favour can, as the rhetoric of chastisement suggests, lead to scorn or marginalization from the able-bodied, who perceive themselves as benefitting from a more privileged relationship to the divine.

In modern discourses, as Lois Keith contends, ideas about disability are circulated via both idiom (22) and narratives (8) that reinforce patterns of negative signification. Art imitates life when literary narratives marginalise disabled fictional characters or relegate them to supporting roles (Garland-Thomson 9), for patterns of discrimination tend to sideline people with disabilities from prominent social positions. Life in turn imitates art, when the normalising power of images, turns of phrase and familiar narratives work to make disability the ultimate abnormality, and therefore limit its place in society. The linguistic conventions and cultural discourses that embed these collective preconceptions are not necessarily deliberate, but rather both arise from and form what Goffman characterises as our mostly unconscious normative expectations about bodies and identities (24). This shift to thinking about disability as an identity, exemplified by critics such as Garland-Thomson and Siebers, helps in moving away from models of disability that focus on causality whether it be "real", as medical models would maintain, or symbolic and representative of other orders of consequence.

Ironically, the shift away from causal schemas was made possible thanks to greater understandings about medicine and biology in the 19th century, for the religious model of disability was dislodged by one that was both more scientific and more "moral" (as opposed to religious) in orientation. The scientific impetus for abandoning the theories of divine causation did not, however, quash the belief that persons with disabilities (particularly acquired disabilities) were in some way responsible for their situation.[2] What Siebers facetiously dubs

[2] For those born with disabilities, the "faults" have not been attributed to them, but rather to their parents. Mothers in particular, whether through their sins, impure thoughts or actions (such as looking upon horrifying sights or eating

"the logic of blaming victims for their own pain" (34) is quietly played out when obese persons are accused of eating themselves into their abnormal bodies, when the young man in a wheelchair following a motorcycle accident is silently chided for being reckless or when laziness and not limitations on employment and earning capacity are signalled as the cause of a disabled person's poverty. The judgments associated with the bodily "result" of social, moral, and religious transgression often leaves people with disabilities "outside or on the fringes" of society and thus, in René Girard's estimation, makes them vulnerable to impulses of self-preservation—violence—from the larger community (*Violence and the Sacred* 12). So while "personal responsibility" may have eclipsed the divine in considerations of cause, the punitive or consequential nature of disability remains firmly entrenched in mainstream discourses.

In both traditional religious and modern secular views, pity often accompanies these judgments and exclusions. Before epidemics of plague swept Europe and created fear-driven associations between bodily difference and contagion, the disabled were seen as impetuses for charity (Stiker 77). As greater scientific understanding disentangled these concepts and reduced the threat that disabled bodies were perceived to pose, charity and pity once again emerged and restored the curious bivalence to disability (Mitchell and Snyder 121). When the World Wars saw thousands of disabled veterans returning, the rhetoric changed once again and discourses of sacrifice prompted a sort of pitying reverence for younger disabled men in particular (Stiker 121). With this last wave of acquired disabilities, external circumstances could quite readily be acknowledged as the cause, which helped to distance the disabled person's character and its suspected flaws from the relative normalcy or abnormality of their body and its functions. These

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certain foods—a prohibition that still weighs upon pregnant women today), were seen as responsible for their children's disabilities. Caring for these children was thus figured as the divinely ordained burden for the parents.

attitudinal shifts show how pity can serve as a check on moralistic models of disability, albeit not without its own problems.

The religious implications of disability underscore what has emerged as a sort of binary of victimhood and villainy, which in literature, film and theatre often amounts to representational reductivism.[3] For Mitchell and Snyder, disability in narratives (literary and other) is an aspect of characterisation that draws attention to itself and thus to the protagonist. A central question of these narratives, and much of the critique they generate, is whether or not disability is "the foundation of character itself" (6). For Keith, disability and its "cure" in children's narratives is about the transformation—and redemption—of character (5) and this narrative arc has become a generic convention of children's fiction in particular given its pedagogical function (238). Although Mitchell and Snyder note that "bodies show up in stories as dynamic entities that resist or refuse the cultural scripts assigned to them" (49), these cultural scripts, the stereotypes of disability like victimhood or villainy, remain operative insofar as contestation does not empty these notions of their meaning, but rather reinforces them through differentiation.

Narratives of Disability

Thériault's manipulation of both the divine punishment and countervailing pathos-inducing interpretations of disability in *Les Commettants* proceeds via both direct contradiction and subtle narratological play.[4] It is this narratological craft that pushes the portrayal of disability

[3] See, for instance, Leslie A. Fiedler, *Pity and Fear: Myths and Images of the Disabled in Literature Old and New: proceedings of a literary symposium sponsored by ICD-International Center for the Disabled in collaboration with the United Nations, October 27, 1981* and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

[4] A number of Thériault's other novels also take up the idea of disability or bodily difference and often associate these conditions to divine will. In *La fille laide*, the title character gives birth to a child that is both blind and deaf, only to reason that her baby's disabilities are the result of a murder the father committed and that she covered up. In *L'Appelante*, a character that is disfigured by a blind man's cane seeks revenge by paralyzing him in retribution for the linked faults of blindness (his using his cane to defend himself when frightened) and his unpleasant temperament.

beyond the simple contestation of established myths. Rather by both using them and subverting them, Thériault challenges not only many of the stereotypes about disability, but also several dominant trends in its literary representation.

The story revolves around Herón, a gallant young Andalusian who is the envy of his community for his charm and good looks. His coveted status springs not only from his physical attributes and personality, but also for his having dared to leave his remote village (described in Thériault's prose as almost pre-modern in its social organization) in search of adventure. When he returns, falsely boasting of an apprenticeship in the bullrings of the city, the villagers, emboldened by alcohol, goad him into an improvised bullfight. During the course of this mock corrida the animal diverts its attention from the ersatz matador to Herón's intended, Pilár. She is killed by the beast, which then turns on Herón. By the time he can be pulled to safety, he has suffered injuries that leave him with limited use of his arms and one of his legs and a number of visible scars.

The explanation of how Herón came to be disabled, however, is made known only at the novel's end, a twist that defies a prevalent trend in which disability, as the metaphor *par excellence*, speaks for itself. By contrast, in making the reluctantly divulged recounting of the events that culminated in threats against Burlón (the traveler who stopped Herón from being jeered, spat upon, and stoned by Caridad's children) the novel's central narrative arc, disability cannot—as Mitchell and Snyder argue that it often does—fade away (56). Disability and its relation to punishment therefore becomes central to the story, because it must explicate and attempt to justify that which many texts (given the prevalence of assumptions about disability and punishment) take for granted.

The narrative begins just after the attack on Burlón, when his attempts to stop the abuse caused a mob to chase him out of town at knifepoint. This violent act incited his cousin, the first of the story's three narrators, to investigate the attempted assault. This legitimate inquisitiveness eventually reveals not only how Herón's accident came about, but also how he and his fellow villagers had negotiated an understanding; Herón would endure the cruel taunts and abuses as a form of penance for having lied about his activities in the city. His punishment would serve to attenuate the community's guilt for having pushed him to be their matador and thus, indirectly, for their role in the tragedy.

Thériault's disjointed narrative allows him to introduce Herón's condition to readers through the eyes of the outsiders and not as the consequence of his actions. Hence, it narratologically separates the notions of disability and punishment. Indeed when the narration begins, there is no indication that Herón's impairments (like the unexplained disability that supposedly "speaks for itself") are linked to anything other than a congenital condition. The reports from the two naïve outsiders who have stumbled into Caridad's intrigue describe Herón as:

> l'homme bossu, crochu, mal en point, jambe torte—tordue même—un bras à hue, le poignet à dia, un visage défait déjà et mal refait. Sorte de mauvais ouvrage d'un Créateur pour une fois malhabile. (15)
> [the hunchbacked man, crooked, in bad shape, leg twisted—knotted even—an arm going this way, a wrist going that way, a face disassembled and badly reassembled. A sort of bad work of an exceptionally clumsy Creator].[5]

Although a darkly humorous remark in the Québécois tradition of sardonic religious humour, the reference signals two undercurrents that, despite the separation imposed by the narrative, will shape much of the discourse around disability in the novel. First, the deformed body is explicitly associated with the divine, even though this initial observation stops well short of designating a

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

punitive motive. Second, the highly colloquial description implicitly communicates a sense of pity that mitigates any impression of divine will.

As the story unfolds and the cause of disability and the attacks are explained, the correlation between disability and the divine grows stronger and takes on a causal inflection: "Voir Herón, a clamé Burlón plus tard en se signant, c'est apercevoir l'Enfer par un trou dans la terre" (15) [Seeing Herón, later proclaimed Burlón as he crossed himself, is seeing Hell through a hole in the ground]. To associate the disabled stranger with the tortures and ghastly sights of Hell triggers a sense of grave wrongdoing, one that prompts the stranger to cross himself, as though to implore God's mercy on the condemned. This suspicion increases over the course of the novel and thereby makes the explanation that Herón finally offers for his condition little more than a confirmation of what the reader had imagined for some time: "Dieu, dit-on, fait bien ce qu'il fait. Il m'a rendu informe, c'est un châtiment" (160) [God is said to do well what he undertakes. He has made me misshapen; it's a chastisement]. For literary critic Jean-Paul Simard, the divine punishment hypothesis is not only valid, but a fitting outcome, a sort of comeuppance, for the "elegant" man who had now become "lame" (42). This interpretation, if nothing else, attests to the prevalence of the mythology of disability as punishment in Judeo-Christian narratives.

Despite Herón's assertion of the divine nature of his disability, two intertwined discourses, one religious, and the other legalistic, cast doubt on the legitimacy of the punishment hypothesis. The community, the same one that carries out the story's opening abuses, initially rejects his idea and argues that the injuries were the result of an accident and nothing more. They dismiss the explanation as a delusion, the ramblings of a fever-stricken man. Four separate individuals—the bartender who over-served the goading crowd, the two men (including Pilár's

father) who actually challenged Herón, and the woman who supplied the bull for the fight—even posit themselves as the ultimately responsible parties in tragedy. The villagers' intervention in the causal discourse is simultaneously meant to temper Herón's feelings of guilt and to convince him to abandon his plans of becoming the community's scapegoat. They even go so far as to imply that Herón should cease to torture himself with scenarios of further punishment to appease God because, they reason, what he has already endured constitutes a more than "just" punishment. How, they seem to argue, could God level such an excessive sentence on only one of the guilty parties; surely the disabilities must be considered an accident and not divine will? By insinuating that the consequences far outweigh the sin and that similarly "guilty" parties have faced no consequences, the villagers move to discount the valence of disability as divine punishment and restore a morally neutral interpretation to the accident. This attempt to rationalize the situation nevertheless retrenches the myth, for as Mitchell and Snyder argue, "cripples are those who inspire pity and pathos while also evoking fears of divine retribution and an illogic in nature" (185n). In telling Herón that his disability cannot be the product of a vengeful God but simply a misfortune, the villagers attempt to convince themselves that their role in precipitating the accident could not cause a comparable fate to be levelled on them. In treating Herón's new embodiment as the representation of their fears about themselves, a notion explored by both Murphy and Garland-Thomson, the myth of disability as divine punishment, while superficially and vocally denied, also quietly and self-servingly reasserts itself.

The second rebuttal comes from the theory's greatest proponent, which is to say Herón himself. He articulates the thought that he judges to be on everyone's mind when he confesses: "Si je n'avais pas menti, la mort de Pilár n'aurait été qu'un accident. Une faute, une négligence, mais pas un crime. Mais j'ai menti" (170). [Had I not lied, Pilár's death would have only been an

accident: an error, a negligence, but not crime. But I lied.] By characterizing his actions as criminal, Herón's confession supplants belief in a system predicated on penance (religion) with one centered on punishment (law). His confession to the villagers and not a priest (as the custom of Catholic Spain would dictate), further posits the community as the body that should determine his punishment. In casting himself as *the* guilty party, Herón rhetorically grants the village its innocence, for the logic of even the most basic of legal systems holds that only a neutral party can sentence the guilty. The village consequently gains neutrality in the affair all the while letting, indeed forcing, Herón to be the sole culpable party.

The admission to the community rather than to the story's curiously absent cleric entreats the villagers to not only accept the declaration as truth, but also to assist in the expiation of guilt by carrying out the sentence. To do so they collectively continue the chastisement that Herón assumes is divine in origin and engage in what Maurice Emond calls a "mutilation morale" [moral mutilation] of the already mutilated man (35). Herón outlines his punishment, one familiar to the reader who had seen it carried out at the opening of the novel: "Je viendrai une fois le jour au village. Que l'on me jette la pierre, que l'on me crache dessus, que l'on pique mon mulet, que les enfants me courent sus" (172). [I will come to the village once a day for you to throw stones upon, to spit upon, for you to taunt my burrow, for the children to charge upon me.] In dictating his own fate, Herón finds himself in the curious position of being able to set his own sentence. While unusual in both religious and legal contexts, his choice in the matter undermines the divine punishment myth. It does so not, as Emond argues, because it is a "suicide symbolique, la fuite par excellence" (35) [a symbolic suicide, the best kind of escape] from his own culpability, but rather because the divine leaves no room for discretion. If disability were in fact divine punishment in the Catholic framework of the story, the person being punished would have

no leeway to decide in which way God, whether directly or indirectly, should impose himself. Thériault thus makes the divine aspect of the myth variable, as evidenced by Herón's dictating the terms of the violence against him, and incomplete, for he must solicit daily abuses (from children nonetheless) to supplement the punishment that his disability is supposed to be. For Herón to consciously assume this sacrificial role on top of his bodily difference contradicts either the status of his condition in relation to the divine or the belief in an omnipotent God capable of such punitive acts. Given the earlier threat to the punishment hypothesis posed by the villagers and the highly Catholic contexts of both the story and the cultural milieu from which the novel issues, the latter option seems considerably less probable.

Divine Punishment or Sacrificial Scapegoat?

If the actions of those in Caridad threaten the myth of divine punishment, they do not negate the related notion of corporeal punishment as a kind of expiatory sacrifice, a divine punishment by proxy. Herón deliberately casts what will be ritualized cruelty as such an act when, citing the story of the scapegoat that he had heard from a travelling monk, he decides that his punishment will be to transform himself into a sacrificial being: "Je serai pour tous l'unique porteur des péchés, le libérateur, le bouc émissaire" (173). [I will be the sole bearer of sins, the liberator, the scapegoat for you all.] [6] The Christ-like resonances of this sentence are obvious in the Catholic tradition and are likely to underlie even the monk's story as a motivation for Herón's actions. Perhaps weary of the deistic and less than humble implications of the association, however, it is never mentioned by the man whose fault was self-aggrandisement and

[6] Simard also argues that there is a sacrificial ritual taking place in Caridad, but locates it in the bullring and identifies Herón as the "priest" and Pilár as the victim. Insofar as the corrida itself is a form of sacrificial violence in Spanish culture, this thesis holds, but the more obvious scapegoating is not taken up as a locus of sacrificial violence against Herón. See Simard, *Rituel et langage*, 42.

his desire to be the centre of attention. Shrinking from these associations, but still dictating terms, Herón hastens to add: "Du jour où je laisserai quelqu'un me défendre ou que je me défendrai moi-même, que Caridad se voile la face! Vous porterez tous de nouveau le poids de la faute" (174). [The day I allow somebody to defend me or that I defend myself Caridad will have to cover its face in shame. You will all have to bear the burden of the wrongdoing.] The insistence on the singularity of "la faute" speaks to a (perceived) continued need to atone for a sin/crime so serious that it caused both Pilár's death and Herón's disability. Indeed, for Herón to take on the role of the scapegoat in such close proximity to the mention of the transgression confirms the extent of his feelings of guilt, which will prompt him to bear not only the responsibility for the tragedy of the bullfight, but also for all of Caridad's sins—past, present, and future—in an effort to redeem himself.

Mitchell and Snyder argue "the treatment of bodily affliction as punishment results in the debasing cycle of vengeance and guilt" (85). Herón's thinking about his disability and his atypical insistence on becoming the village's scapegoat confirms guilt's place in the story. Like the scapegoats Girard describes, Herón occupies the role of sacrificial victim, which can be defined as a "woebegone figure, an object of scorn who is also weighed down with guilt; a butt for all sorts of gibes, insults, and of course, outbursts of violence" (*Violence and the Sacred* 95). In the process, these actions absolve the group by giving it an outlet for a violent impulse that would otherwise be turned inward to threaten the community itself. The knowledge that Herón has taken up this role to channel the collective animosity and to spare the village of few more than a dozen households from turning against itself and the five (or more) responsible actors retrenches this vital function. Herón's adoption of the sacrificial role and the villagers' reluctant

willingness to play along, while in many ways consistent with Girard's analysis, nevertheless differs from it enough to put the perceived expiatory nature of the violent acts into question.

According to Girard, successful sacrifice can inspire no vengeance, lest it disintegrate into a retaliatory sacrificial crisis. Moreover, Catholic traditions about the mortification of the flesh as atonement, even when inflicted by others, should not extend beyond the act of (self) sacrifice and (self) punishment. Burlón's actions nonetheless constitute a form of retribution, an almost reflexive redress of the wrongdoing he attributes to the villagers, which in turn occasions a more overt and violent retaliation. In light of what the discontinuous narrative conceals at the outset of the novel, Burlón's response to the sight of children abusing Herón is entirely comprehensible. Thanks to the patterns of culturally embedded discrimination against persons with disabilities, it is logical to conclude, much as Burlón did, that the Herón who appears at the outset of the narrative is being tormented because of his disability, not because he lied or because he orchestrated the sacrificial ritual to be taken out upon him. The discontinuous narrative makes it all but impossible to see the initial violence against both Herón and Burlón as anything but prejudicial aggression, especially given the pre-modern character Thériault ascribes to the village. In breaching the terms of the sacrificial pact by inspiring a cycle of revenge, the supposedly purifying violence becomes little more than violence for its own sake. The sacred nature of the acts having fallen away, the role of the divine in the entire sacrificial arrangement, which includes the disability in Herón's figuration, again comes into question.

The attempts to justify the violence, the *raison d'être* of the narrative, ultimately fail to account for the incomprehensibility of the scene that opens the novel. Each chapter, which is meant to explain the need for the ritualized violence (as opposed to that which the cultural context of discrimination would have readers condemn but comprehend) succeeds only in

perpetuating the illogicality and profane nature of the brutality. Herón's assessment of his disability as incomplete punishment for his sins rings hollow compared to the pathos-inducing scene, so much so that disability initially, and also retroactively, presents itself as more than enough punishment. The subsequent chapters fail to strip away the pathos generated by the initial traumatic spectacle. Caridad's grotesque brutality accordingly becomes something that, in Derrida's terms, "adds only to replace" (*Of Grammatology* 145). The notion of disability as a deserved divine violence is therefore challenged by both the perceived need to supplement it and the objectionable, indeed nonsensical, manner in which this supplementary punishment is carried out.

Despite Burlón's intervention and the retaliation it provokes, the sacrificial arrangement in Caridad is always already in a state of crisis. The agreement between Herón and the villagers calls on them to abuse him and to defend the ritual, for the expiation of any future sins—like those of the past—is contingent upon Herón remaining defenceless and indefensible. It also requires the villagers to act always with a pure heart and pure intentions. Pursuing a release from sin at another's expense, while at the core of Christianity, proves to be quite self-serving in the context of Thériault's pathos-inducing narrative. Burlón's actions, despite the harsh words of his narrator-cousin, are likely to be recognized as the acts of a Good Samaritan. Threatening to kill the story's incarnation of this celebrated biblical figure would assuredly cast doubt on the purity of Caridad's intentions, even if the motive for their attacks were to yield no personal gain. The sacred violence of the ritual is accordingly turned, in Girard's words, "into a scandalous accomplice in the process of pollution, even a kind of catalyst in the propagation of further impurity" (*Violence and the Sacred* 39).

The accumulation of violent acts and the way they are presented as implausible or as subscribing to a convoluted and ultimately self-serving logic make excess one of the key factors in Thériault's treatment of disability and the myths that surround it. As Brueggemann, Thomson and Snyder note, disability often "acts as a magnet for hyperbolic meaning in texts and lives" (2).[7] In *Les Commettants* it represents—simultaneously—the extremes of social exclusion, myths of divine punishment, pathos, and violent retribution. These extremes represent "l'excès au delà de l'excès" [excess on top of excess] (Derrida *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre, ou, la prothèse d'origine* 82). That which appears *in addition to* signals not only that which overflows with meaning, but which also empties itself of signification to reveal an underlying absence. In this, Thériault's hyperbole is a marker of what Linda Hutcheon calls "corrective irony" (32), for in the profane "replaying" (156) of the divine violence, the mimicry becomes absurd. It also functions, as David Wills argues, as a form of prosthesis insofar as the violence of the scapegoating ritual, preserved at all costs, "is the discovery of an artificiality there where the natural [disability as ordained by God] founds its priority" (16). The contrivance of punishment in God's name draws attention to the equally fabricated notion of punishment that is meted out by some celestial judge.

Conclusion

The excess of overstatements that characterizes the portrayal of disability in Thériault's narrative is a compelling indication that the disabled body amounts, at the very least, to more than a one-dimensional trope. When Herón becomes the locus for several excessive

[7] Girard argues that the scapegoat should not be seen as a sort of substitute victim, but rather as one that is the legitimate locus for the violent impulses: "the only good scapegoats are the ones we are unable to acknowledge as such" ("Interview: René Girard" 33).

characterizations—the deceitful figure worthy of his punishments, the Christ-like scapegoat, the pitiful cripple—however, the superfluousness of all-encompassing understandings of disability becomes a source of ambiguity. Thériault thus paradoxically, and remarkably given the timing of the novel’s publication, succeeds in breaking free of reductive depictions of disability. In embracing all these contradictory roles, especially to the degree he does, Herón comes to embody none of them for he vacates them of their embedded cultural meanings.

The narrative’s play upon and with the reader’s assumptions about violence and disability therefore allows for a release from what Mitchell and Snyder have termed “narrative prosthesis” or the discursive dependency on disability as either “a stock feature of characterization” or an “opportunistic metaphorical device” (47). The reversals of plot and the crafty game of expectations and first impressions that Thériault sets up make narrative play and the game of culturally conditioned expectations, not disability, punishment or violence the central feature of the story. Hence disability is ultimately allowed to be what it first appears to be in Burlón’s early characterization of Herón: a set of physical traits that are recognized for their anomalous quality.

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