Recovering Disability in Early Modern England

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Shakespearean Disability Pedagogy

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Introducing disability studies to the early modern period might transform not just our scholarship but our classroom practices as well. We invite readers of this collection to imagine the essays herein as instruments of an "enabling pedagogy" that conceives of, as Brenda Brueggemann writes, "disability as insight."[1] Disability pedagogy understands and remarks upon disability as inherent in human experience and hence universally crucial to our students' educations. As one example of how teachers might integrate disability into their classroom practices and conversations, we would like to briefly narrate the trajectory of a course, "Shakespeare and Disability," that Allison Hobgood offered while teaching at Spelman College, a historically Black women's institution in Atlanta, Georgia. The goal of the course, as Hobgood explained it to her undergraduates, was threefold: to introduce disability studies as a critical approach, to imagine how contemporary disability theory might shape readings of Renaissance literature, and to uncover new disability histories in the early modern period. Further, she framed the academic venture with some basic questions: Where is the disabled body located in Shakespeare's canon, and how is it figured? How and where do both material and literary representations of disability appear in this period more broadly? What traditions relating to disability did Shakespeare inherit, and what early modern views inform our contemporary notions of differ-

ence? Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, what innovative critical interventions might we make by interrogating disability in Shakespeare?

In a seminar of twenty-five aspiring Shakespeareans, only one or two students identified as disabled, and even then, only timidly. Over time, though, many women began to see how their normative identities were constructed in relation to disability and how a subtle yet pervasive ableist discourse shaped their daily experiences and practices. Students began to notice a *lack* of disabled classmates at Spelman, for instance, and wondered about institutional support for disability. They found themselves identifying disability in close friends and family in ways they had never expected or noticed before. Most frequently, however, students teased out the intersections of disability, gender, race, and class, exploring, for example, how Aaron's blackness in *Titus Andronicus* could be "disabling" yet was not "disability."[2] Their own subject positions as predominately able-bodied, black women gave them unique insights into these intersections, especially in terms of exploring tensions between the materiality of the early modern body—its tangible pain or visible skin color—and its social construction. They began to see how, amidst their well-honed impulses to "decry racism, sexism, and class bias, it [had] not occurred to most of them," as Lennard Davis points out, "that the very foundations on which their information systems are built . . . are themselves laden with assumptions about . . . ability and disability in general."[3] Throughout the semester, students not only read Shakespeare to expose a new history of the early modern disabled body and to discover how that history was shaped, inflected, and complicated by other sorts of embodiment during the English Renaissance but also to shake up their complacent participation in a *modern* ableist hegemony that normatively insists on marking disabled individuals—and, indeed, all difference—as "other."

The course began fairly conventionally with readings by Stephen Greenblatt, Andrew Gurr, and Russ McDonald that outlined the fundamentals of early modern English theater—playhouse spaces, audience members, acting companies, and so on—as well as the historical contexts that surrounded playgoing.[4] Students then tackled Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Richard III* alongside Margaret Winzer's "Disability and Society before the Eighteenth Century."[5] This conjunction was meant to provide students with some background on disability throughout the ages, to remind them of its sociohistorical situatedness, and to coax them into discussion about disability more generally. In Shakespeare's depiction of a ruthless and "rudely stamped" king (1.1.16), *Richard III* confirms students' initial, somewhat narrow sense of disability as always both physical and visible. Richard is an accessible character who initiates a crucial, though rather predictable, conversation about early modern

subjectivity: What is the correlation between exterior materiality and interior selfhood? Does Shakespeare's play suggest that Richard's disabled body betrays a corrupted soul punished for its sinfulness? Is Richard "naturally" evil or has his embodiment, and circumstantial responses to it, created his discontent? In this class, however, the play also provoked new insights about the junctures of class, disability, and even metaphor: for example, could Richard's representation as a "lump of foul deformity" (1.2.57) reflect his status as a third-born son? It also prompted musings about the play's portrayal of women as both more aware of and sensitive to the advantages and limitations of Richard's physical difference. As a counterpoint especially to this discussion of gender and disability in *Richard III,* students then read Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and investigated Lavinia's rape and mutilation as a gendered disability performance. Again, however, the bodies in this particular play are characterized by *physical* difference—lost limbs and severed tongues abound—and hence are easily recognized and categorized by students as "disabled."

In the next section of the course, therefore, Hobgood encouraged class members to expand their notions of what disability "looks like" by asking them to conceive of chronic illness as disability. Students specifically took up Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Julius Caesar* in conjunction with Erving Goffman's *Stigma* and Lerita Coleman's "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified."[6] They spent time deconstructing Goffman and Coleman, grappling with the connections between physical and social stigma as well as the differences between stigma and stereotype. These conversations occurred in tandem with a reading of *Julius Caesar* and discussions of how disabilities such as epilepsy (as well as deafness) are often visually unidentifiable.[7] Caesar "passed," the students decided, as nondisabled for most of the play and hence embodied disability in a much more complex fashion than Shakespeare's Lavinia or Richard III. Students also identified, among other things, how this drama evidenced coincident, cultural disability narratives in the Renaissance; the narrative of Caesar's "falling sickness" is informed simultaneously by a latent medieval sense of the marvelous as well as a burgeoning early modern trend toward scientific rationalism.

The second half of the semester gained focus around Tobin Siebers's essay "Disability in Theory" and viewing of a video called "Talk" by the UK Disability Rights Commission.[8] This pairing was meant to throw into practical relief many of the theoretical issues students had addressed thus far and to remind them how much of their work in the course was explicitly historical.[9] "Talk" especially prompted conversation about how the scholarly activity of recovering disability histories was relevant to contemporary disability

activism. The class then read *The Tragedy of King Lear* alongside Bradley Lewis's essay "A Mad Fight: Psychiatry and Disability Activism" and engaged disability and activism in the contexts of madness, "sanism," and ageism.[10] Could Lear be characterized as disabled? When does he begin to identify as such? Does his status as disabled have more to do with age or insanity? One young woman even went so far as to recognize other "disabling" instances in *King Lear,* positing Edmund's illegitimacy as a very broad form of impairment in the play. She imagined Edmund's blood as deviant, as the invisible physical marker of his stigma and bastardization. Edmund's biology, according to her logic, rendered him less able to function in a society that refused to acknowledge positively his unconventional kinship ties and mottled blood lineage.

These discussions of Lewis and *King Lear* were followed closely by an investigation of representations of the "freak" in early modern literature. Students first read Shakespeare's long poem *Venus and Adonis* and explored Venus as embodying freakishness.[11] They combined more traditional readings of gender inversion, homoeroticism, and androgyny in this epyllion with a disability narrative about Venus's Amazonian size and strength.[12] Specifically, a number of students conceived of what previously has been imagined as Venus's transgressive gender and sexuality instead as the poem's exploitation of her physical difference: Venus as freakishly super-abled.[13] The catalyst for this interesting reading was Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's chapter "The Cultural Work of American Freak Shows" from her influential book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture.*[14] The challenge of using this particular essay lay in reminding students of the specificity of Garland-Thomson's argument and helping them resist an ahistorical collapsing of her narrative onto Shakespeare's work. Carefully, then, students worked to clarify representations of freakishness in both *Venus and Adonis* and in the final play of the semester, *The Tempest.* They put into fruitful conversation three texts widely disparate in their geographical and historical interests but similar in their understanding of the sometimes tragic and yet always seductive spectacle that is human variation.[15]

As even this very brief review of Hobgood's undergraduate course attests, early modern disability studies, in *all* its iterations, develops from a flexible array of historicist and presentist methodologies and textual- and performance-related concerns that work together to examine difference, selfhood, and identity in the Renaissance. *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* thus serves as an initiating example of how we might complicate and deepen current work on disability and an illustration of how Renaissance studies informs disability studies and vice versa. Training ourselves to pursue non-normativity and its various manifestations in the full breadth of early

modern English literature allows us to understand as new that which we have presumed to be settled. Reading and thinking from a disability perspective can usefully recondition us—and our students—not only to the historicized ways in which early modern writing once meant, but also to the multivalent ways in which it continues to do so.

Notes

1. Brenda Brueggemann, "An Enabling Pedagogy," in Snyder et al., *Disability Studies,* 321.

2. William Shakespeare, *The Most Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus,* in Greenblatt et al., *Norton Shakespeare,* 371–434. While Hobgood encouraged intellectual risk-taking, she cautioned students against an uncritical collapsing of the disability category onto race and gender systems. Following Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's logic, she explained that "one must be vigilant not to conflate them [race, gender, and disability] so as to suggest that racial categorization, for example, is the same thing as disability, but simply in another form;" see Davis, "Integrating Disability Studies into the Existing Curriculum," *Disability Studies Reader,* 1st ed., 305.

3. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy,* 4–5.

4. Stephen Greenblatt, "General Introduction," *Norton Shakespeare,* 1–24; Andrew Gurr, "The Shakespearean Stage," *Norton Shakespeare,* 3281–88; and Russ McDonald, "Performances, Playhouses, and Players," *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 40–73.

5. Winzer, "Disability and Society," 75–109; and William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Richard III,* in Greenblatt et al., *Norton Shakespeare,* 507–600.

6. See again Davis, *Disability Studies Reader,* 1st ed., 203–15 and 216–31, respectively.

7. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar,* in Greenblatt et al., *Norton Shakespeare,* 1525–90.

8. Tobin Siebers, "Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body," in Davis, *Disability Studies Reader,* 2nd ed., 173–84. As described online by the Disability Rights Commission, "'Talk' is an award-winning 12 minute film which challenges misconceptions about disability in a creative and entertaining way. Starring TV heart-throb Jonathan Kerrigan of BBC's 'Casualty' fame, 'Talk' portrays a society in which non-disabled people are a pitied minority and disabled people live full and active lives. Kerrigan plays a business executive, whose negative preconceptions of disability are dramatically shattered. 'Talk' was screened at numerous independent UK film festivals, at the Palm Springs Film Festival, USA, the Osnabruck Film Festival, Austria and the 2002 Maui Film Festival, Hawaii, and won the Short Film Award at the Third Rushes Soho Shorts Film Festival in August 2001. As part of 'Citizenship and Disability,' a classroom resource for teachers at Key Stages 3 and 4, 'Talk' has been sent free to schools throughout England, and is used as part of the National Curriculum." Access the video in two parts via YouTube at the following links:

Part 1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZfOVNwjFU0&feature= related

Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9a2ZqLhuAw&feature=related

9. We would also recommend screening with students *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back,* dir. David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (Brace Yourselves Productions, 1997).

10. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear: A Conflated Text,* in Greenblatt et al., *Norton Shakespeare,* 2479–554; Bradley Lewis, "A Mad Fight: Psychiatry and Disability Activism," in Davis, *Disability Studies Reader,* 2nd ed., 339–54.

11. William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis,* in Greenblatt et al., *Norton Shakespeare,* 601–34.

12. See Katherine Schwarz, *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) for more on early modern Amazons.

13. For more on desire and sexuality in this poem, see Richard Rambuss, "What It Feels Like for a Boy: Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis,*" in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume IV: The Poems, Problem Comedies, Late Plays,* ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 240–58; James Schiffer, "Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis:* A Lacanian Tragicomedy of Desire," in *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays,* ed. Philip Kolin (New York: Garland, 1997), 359–76; and Goran Stanivukovic, "Troping Desire in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis,*" *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 33, no. 4 (October 1997): 289–301.

14. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* 55–80.

15. Caliban is described by Trinculo as "Legged like a man, and his fins / like arms" (2.2.31–32), a "monster of the isle with four legs" (62), and a "moon-calf" (100). Trinculo also alludes to the wealth and fame that Caliban's exploitation might offer back in England: "Were I in England now, / as I once was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday-fool / there but would give a piece of silver. There would this mon- / ster make a man" (26–29); see William Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* in Greenblatt et al., *Norton Shakespeare,* 3055–107.