Object Oriented Environs

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Crutches and Cripistemology in The Fair Maid of the Exchange

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The Cripple, the central character of the anonymous 1607 city comedy The Fair Maid of the Exchange, describes the onset of his disability as “the visitation of my legges, and my expence in timber.”¹ His statement frames this experience in both enlivened and economic terms. “Visitation,” defined as affliction with illness or trouble, was usually accompanied by the subject performing that action, for instance, “the visitation of the Lord” or “the visitation of death.”² In this case, however, his phrase suggests that the legs themselves enacted the visitation. “Expence in timber” describes his adoption of crutches as an investment in the high-stakes early modern timber market.³ The Cripple’s merging of agential objects and commercial objects exemplifies a union that occurs throughout the play. In exploring the liveliness of things in the commercial environment of the play, I suggest that this text carefully attends to their vitality, while the play’s characters are primarily attentive only to their financial power. The exception is the Cripple, who seems occasionally capable of seeing both their value and vitality. Considering how and why he possesses such a capability illuminates the ethical limits and

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² “Visitation, n., 6–8,” oed.
³ For more on the roles of wood in early modern theater, see Vin Nardizzi’s Wooden Os: Shakespeare’s Theaters and England’s Trees (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).
potential of object-oriented theory, specifically as it relates to prosthesis and disability.

The crutches stand (or lean?) at the center of the plot of *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*. With the assistance of his crutches, the Cripple maintains a successful business as a drawer of textile designs, running a shop in London’s Royal Exchange.4 Wielding one of his crutches as a weapon, he stops the attempted rape of two of the Exchange’s shopgirls, and his courageous actions win him the devotion of one of them, Phillis Flower. However, the attackers return, steal his crutches out from underneath him, and the Cripple finds himself in need of rescuing alongside the women. Luckily a passing young gentleman, Frank Golding, saves all three of them and falls in love with Phillis in the process. The Cripple is clearly uncomfortable with the debt of gratitude he feels he owes Frank for saving his life, and the majority of the plot focuses on his efforts to restore equilibrium to their relationship. With Frank in love with Phillis, Phillis in love with the Cripple, and the Cripple indebted to Frank, the Cripple devises an ingenious (albeit improbable) solution to everyone’s problems: he lends Frank his crutches and helps him win Phillis’s affections while disguised as the Cripple himself.

The Cripple’s crutches become especially active — even agential — in the scenes where Frank pretends to be the Cripple. The crutches enact the imitation of the Cripple more than Frank does. *Fair Maid* contains a range of evidence attesting to Frank’s generally shoddy performance skills. He is usually a rather half-hearted actor (particularly in his disguise as a porter named “Trusty John” earlier in the play) whose success depends on his careful supervision by the Cripple and/or the general gullibility of his audiences. While the Cripple proves a talented stage-manager elsewhere in the play, when it comes to Frank’s crucial performance as the Cripple himself, he remains surprisingly hands-off. Given all these factors, Frank’s impersonation shouldn’t work, but instead it is a resounding success.

And this success rests entirely on the crutches.

In the many references made to these crutches before Frank’s performance, characters speak of them directly (“Snatch away his crutches,”

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4 The only shops in the Royal Exchange were located on the building’s second floor, the “Pawn”; the play confirms this (1265). This means that the Cripple’s shop and the play itself are set in a uniquely inaccessible location for someone with a mobility impairment.
the Cripple swears by them (“By this crutch but I will,” 726); other characters even synecdochically call the Cripple “crutch” (“Come crutch, thou shalt with us,” 719.) But after Frank’s performance as the Cripple, the crutches are not named again in the play. The absence of their name corresponds to their increase in agency; at this point in the play, attention turns from the crutches themselves to what the crutches do and specifically what they make: a new body for Frank. Anyone who has experience with crutches will tell you that, for all that people control crutches, crutches also manipulate people. They dig into your armpits, hunch your shoulders, curve your upper body forward, and reorder your gait. Early modern crutches, which employed the traditional T-shape model, had no built-in handholds like the Y-shape model in use today, and so twisted the arms of their users around their central shaft. Crutches are demanding, and their ability to evoke a response from a human body—even to create a new human body out of an old one—demonstrates their vitality. This is evidenced in the text. No costume change seems to mark the beginning of the performance (although it seems reasonable to assume one occurs). Instead the crutches are the primary component of Frank’s disguise.⁵ Even so, the crutches are rarely named directly; instead, once animate, they are defined by their activity/creation. Over and over, Frank’s disguise is described as a “shape”: “Assume this shape of mine,” (1966); “Now to employ the virtue of my shape” (2043); “Give me leave / To come and court hir in my borrowed shape” (2394).⁶ Although Frank may “assume” the shape, it would be impossible for him to fully make it without the force of the crutches reforming his body into a new configuration. The “shape” that they create becomes the focus of these scenes, and they remain active throughout the rest of the play. Not only do they form Frank’s body, they shape the Cripple, too; they assault would-be rapists;

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⁵ The crutches’ ability to signal the Cripple’s whole identity hints at how entirely they have become a projection of the Cripple’s body. Elaine Scarry details the phenomenon of projected materialization of the human body and how that materialized objectification extends the powers of sentience, concluding that, “It is not objects but human beings who require champions.” *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press), 305.

⁶ “Shape” could refer to costume or stage dress exclusively, but it was more frequently used during the early modern period to describe material form, specifically the form and contours of the body. See “Shape, n., 1,” *OED*. The play itself conflates the two meanings of the word earlier when a gentleman attempts to proposition a shop girl by asking to “weare / This shape of thine, although I buy it deere” (1236).
they straighten and measure cloth; they create accessibility in the inaccessible world of early modern London.

For me, the crutches also call out to a constellation of similarly vital objects that populate the play. Handkerchiefs send detailed messages; a cache of letters confers social capital and defers unwanted suitors; a counterfeit diamond punishes a villain; and all these examples are in addition to items continuously in action as a result of the play’s setting in a proto-shopping mall. But while the play itself seems to acknowledge the power of objects, the play’s characters seem only aware of their financial value. Both the Cripple and Frank imagine the crutches in terms of economic worth: as discussed before, the Cripple does so by describing them as “my expence in timber” (677). Frank offers to improve on that investment when he hyperbolically promises to “make thee crutches of pure silver” in order to repay the Cripple for his scheming (1537), an offer that underscores his exclusively financial focus since solid silver crutches would be economically valuable but worthless as mobility aids. If other characters in the play see objects as active at all, they regard that animation as a product of commerce and not something intrinsic to the objects.

Certainly these objects have commercial power and are animated by forces of the market. In many ways this play offers a model of nascent commodity fetishism, with the lively crutches, handkerchiefs, letters, and diamonds serving as early modern counterparts to Marx’s dancing table, the ordinary object transformed into an animated thing that “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas” as a result of “step[ping] forth as a commodity” into the enlivening marketplace. In fact, Juana Green and Jean Howard have both commented on the play’s obsessive attention to human relationships (and humans themselves) transformed into objects by market exchange. The characters and the

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critics are not wrong: such readings are important, even necessary, to understanding this play. But what if commodity fetishism isn’t the only thing animating these objects? Can they be seen as more than just dancing tables?

Uniquely for a character in *Fair Maid*, the Cripple can, sometimes, extend his consciousness to see the vitality of objects while also remaining attentive to their commodity power. His first lines, for instance, are directed to his crutches: “Now you supporters of decrepite youth /... Be strong to beare that huge deformitie, /And be my hands nimble to direct them, /As your desires to waft me hence to London” (85–89). While clearly guided by his hands, he sees that the crutches also have “desires” of their own. This ability to imagine his way into the lives of things shows up elsewhere in the play, too: the Cripple reads an embroidered handkerchief, not just for the message its design was intended to send, but for its ability to send new messages of its own. He keeps a collection of papers because he understands their potential for reshaping intellectual identity. The Cripple seems especially attuned to the ways in which objects withdraw, receding from presence into an incomprehensible reality and distancing themselves from humans and all other things. As I have mentioned, the crutches disappear from the text but they also withdraw from the Cripple. Frank never returns them at the end of the play; it seems that their intense usefulness causes them to fade out of presence. The Cripple’s cache of papers is disseminated, also disappearing into use, as are the textiles to which he dedicates so much of his time. Even the other characters withdraw from him; in fact, the whole gambit with Phillis rests on his anticipation of her rejection. The Cripple seems to understand that the more one knows a thing, the less one can access it. When a customer asks him about a textile she has commissioned, the Cripple responds by saying, “I have beene mindefull of your work” (663–64). It seems that he has “beene mindefull” of objects in many ways. All of this is not to say that the Cripple isn’t also deeply invested in his commercial work, nor do I think his attention to thing-power nullifies the commodity fetishism that he facilitates

10 This question seems especially important because of the way the constant valuation of objects in the play actually creates a devaluation of their vital potential, parallel to Jane Bennett’s assessment of the way in which American materialism is actually antimateriality. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

and exhibits. Instead, his epistemological privilege allows him to see how tightly sutured are the commercial and the vital, evidenced especially by the inseparability of “visitation of my legges” and “my expence in timber.”

What makes the Cripple capable of such insight? The text does not offer a direct explanation for his ability to engage with objects this way, but I would like to suggest one possibility: his legs. The Cripple is unique among other crutch-users in early modern drama in that he retains his legs. The majority of other early modern characters with mobility impairments, including Stump in the anonymous *A Larum for London* (1602) and Rafe in Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1600), are amputees. With stage amputees, focus is placed on the dexterousness of their abbreviated bodies, showcasing how they can still fight battles, perform productive labor, woo women, etc. However, characters in *Fair Maid* seem weirdly fixated on the absent presence of the Cripple’s legs, regularly commenting on their non-functionality and drawing particular attention to the way they operate as an assemblage with his crutches. This is especially evident in the instances where characters describe the Cripple as “four-legged” (97, 819). Identifying his crutches as legs themselves attests to their vitality, since it grants them an agency equal to the Cripple’s body, but calling him “four-legged” also highlights way the Cripple’s legs are equated with the crutches, granting his body a pointedly material quality.  

Like Heidegger’s broken tool, his legs reveal themselves as things through their disability, drawing attention to themselves as objects. Disability theorists also frequently describe this material conspicuousness, noting the way in which physical functionality equals invisibility/inattention equals social capital and privilege. Yet Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has also identified the way in which this lack of “material anonymity” for people with disabilities creates a unique awareness of the material world and the way in which its normalized functionality (its Heideggerian *Zuhandenheit*) are revealed—and specifically, revealed to be provisional and temporary. She says, “When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us....So whereas the benefit of fitting is material and visual anonymity, the cost of fitting is

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12 It also suggests an animalistic component to the Cripple’s leg-crutch assemblage, further reinforced by the slurs “cur” and “dog” frequently leveled at him by the braggart Bowdler.

perhaps complacency about social justice and a desensitizing to material experience.”14 The misfitting of the Cripple’s legs within the world of early modern London certainly makes him more obviously an object than his nondisabled counterparts, but foregrounding that object-ness may account for his attentiveness to material experience and to the experience of material as well. Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer term this misfit knowledge “cripistemology,” a type of “thinking from the critical, social, and personal position of disability” that also “explore[s] disability at the places where bodily edges and categorical distinctions blur or dissolve (where the disabled body as literal referent is, if not dematerialized, then differently materialized.)”15 The Cripple’s awareness of agential objects emerging from his embodied experience of disability provides an early modern example of cripistemology.16

But attending to the Cripple’s cripistemology means seeing the limits of focusing on his conspicuous materiality as well as the potential of that focus. As Steven L. Kurzman so effectively argues, when discussing the vitality of objects, especially prostheses, wholeness or brokenness often tends to be constituted in visible and objective terms. The broken tool (or tool-being) is identified as broken because an outside observer notices it to be broken, but the broken tool-being may not perceive of itself that way.17 Frequently relying on (and therefore affirming) a naturalized and stereotypical notion of wholeness, especially corporeal wholeness, prevents the extension of human imagination into the lives of objects, and

16 McRuer’s work on queerness and disability also suggests that the Cripple may be attentive to desires beyond those of his crutches. As in McRuer’s theorization of queer/crip intersections, the Cripple is both barred from sexual desire in that he cannot or does not engage in a romantic relationship with Phillis but remains the object of perverse—in this case voracious—sexual desire, as he reports that he is “hourly solicited” by women in his shop (888). For more on the crip/queer sex and sex objects, see McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); for more on the Cripple’s complicated sexual positioning and the erotics of early modern disability, see Lindsay Row-Heyveld, “Disability and Masculine Commerce in *The Fair Maid of the Exchange,*” *Allegorica* 29 (2013): 88–105.
yet when the “broken tool” is a person, paradoxically, the reliance on naturalized wholeness tends to privilege the agency of the prosthetic over that of the human using prosthetic technology. Vivian Sobchack similarly pushes back against the theorized prosthetic with her material prosthesis. She states that her desired relationship with her prosthetic left leg is one of “transparency,” wherein it is not regarded as an object but seamlessly incorporated “not ‘into’ or ‘on’ but ‘as’ the subject.”18 However, Sobchack specifies that this “desired transparency, however, involves my incorporation of the prosthetic—not the prosthetic’s incorporation of me (although, seen by others to whom a prosthetic is strange, I may well seem its extension rather than the other way around.)”19 Sobchack and Kurzman both circumscribe the limits of matter’s vitality even as they defend the vital matter of their own materiality. In discussing their cripistemoplogical stances, both are careful not to overvalue personal anecdote or privilege autobiographical over discursive experience, but seek to reground discussions of prosthesis in “a more embodied ‘sense-ability.’”20 I suggest that we should do the same with the Cripple and with other disabled characters. While his awareness of his own body as a thing may open the Cripple’s understanding to other lively objects, it may also reveal to him the inertia of those objects. If we are to consider his attentiveness to his uniquely animated crutches, we must also consider what it is for his material self to maneuver on those crutches through the irregular streets of early modern London, to haul them up the stairs to the Pawn of the Royal Exchange, to negotiate his kiosk-sized shop packed with textiles and customers while balancing on them. How does he feel—materially—about the way they shape him: exhilarated, exhausted, indifferent, frustrated, thrilled? When he uses his crutches as a weapon, does he feel the impact ringing through his fingers? When they’re stolen away from him, does it hurt when he falls?

Theorizing the prosthetic, and considering the vitality of objects more generally, has the potential to reveal the Cripple’s crutches at the expense

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20 Sobchack, “A Leg to Stand On,” 18–19. The tension between identarian knowledge and other more theoretical modes of knowing is also central to McRuer and Johnson, “Introduction” and its accompanying roundtable.
of obscuring the Cripple. However, extending that same material attention to the Cripple himself, orienting ourselves to his object-ness, also has the potential to create the “sense-ability” Sobchack calls for, to meet the ethical demands of disability studies, and, possibly, to demonstrate the political consequences object-oriented ontology is often accused of eliding. Focusing primarily on the agency of the crutches can limit understandings of the Cripple’s material reality, but paying attention to the Cripple’s full cripistemology not only reveals his material and epistemological experience, but also that of the crutches as well, since his unique “bodymind” (to borrow a term from Babette Rothschild via Margaret Price) is the very thing that makes the vitality of the crutches visible.21 At the end of *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*, the Cripple recedes from the text. In spite of the central role he occupies throughout the play, other characters carry out all the action of the final moments and he remains strangely silent. It is possible that his extreme functionality as an object in the environment of the play allows him to disappear into the communal assemblage he has crafted in these final moments. It is possible that he is just worn out by all the unacknowledged work he has done and, since his one-time friend Frank will not return his crutches, he has nowhere to go and nothing else to say. Or it is possible that he stands/leans there thrumming with silent satisfaction at what he has made. The Cripple and his crutches both fade in the final scene; however attending to their cripistemology revives them.
