

**Abstracts—Shakespeare’s “Other Disability Plays”**  
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**Seminar Leaders:**

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“Linguistic Excess and Insufficiency in Early Modern Drama”

Scholarly work in premodern disability studies often begins by outlining a range of different so-called models as a way of tracing the development of thinking about disability and positioning the methodology of the study. This has been important work in the context of establishing the validity of premodern disability studies, helping to situate readings of early modern texts and sources within what has been presented as a decidedly modern schema. What might be termed the “models model” makes clear the links between the early modern period and current political and social structures, and this inherent presentism is a self-evident and welcome rationale for the work. However, these models themselves are predicated on a binary distinction between ability and disability – they are differentiated by where they locate the emergence of these two categories – whether in the social, the individual/medical, the religious, or the cultural, for example.

Whilst acknowledging the validity and importance of these approaches, this paper seeks to examine how a tripartite schema might be applied to understanding premodern notions of disability and ability, and to use speech as a way of exploring what insights this approach might yield from early modern dramatic texts. Speech is appropriate here in that the vast majority of a dramatic text represents speech, and uses speech as a way of presenting story and character. This is not to say that dramatic texts can be construed as giving access to the ways in which historical people actually spoke – more that dramatic texts display assumptions and values that outline possible ways of thinking about how to speak, what is good speech, and what speech is understood to be able to say about the people who use it, whether wittingly or unwittingly. Underlying all of these elements is ethical judgement – the shoulds and should nots of the moral philosophy that gives rise to the schema itself. As Alfred D. Menut points out, while Plato saw the virtues as “innate,” Aristotle presents them as “habits of action” which can be “acquired only by a long and difficult discipline of the will.” Thus, this paper does not present a utopian alternative but instead shows how structures of thought fundamentally prefigure understanding.

**Katarzyna Burzyńska, Adam Mickiewicz University**

“I know your back will bear a duchess’ (Henry, 2.3.99): The Compulsion of Pregnancy and the Limits of Bodily Autonomy in *Henry VIII*”

This paper looks at the construction of pregnant embodiment in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII*. I wish to turn my attention to Anne who is the only character who becomes physically pregnant and gives birth in the play. However, I also want to read Anne’s experiences by looking back at

Katherine's gynaecological history that is alluded to in the play more than once. Rather than being polar opposites Anne and Katherine actually share much experience, even if for Katherine it is grounded in the past while for Anne it still lies ahead in the future. The play's many ominous allusions to Anne's tragic fate have been critically recognized. What is less readily acknowledged is the early modern conceptualization of pregnant embodiment as the nexus of the play's central conflict. In this paper I argue that the expected and socially-accepted construction of pregnancy in the period stands in conflict with the actual embodied experience as presented in the play. My reading is inspired by Jennifer Scuro's 2017 part-essay, part-comic book work entitled *The Pregnancy [does not equal] Childbearing Project*. Scuro, looking back at her experience of pregnancy loss, argues that in modern neo-liberal societies pregnancy is always "entangled" in the phenomenon of childbearing. This means that "all meaning of pregnant embodiment rests on the production of a child" (Scuro 2017, xii). Scuro's analysis recognizes "[t]he entrenchment of ableism" in modern, Western societies but an investigation of the origins of this ableism is beyond the scope of her work (Scuro 2017, 179). I argue that her notions are easily applicable to the early modern reality for a very simple reason; the early modern notions surrounding pregnancy laid the foundations for modern discriminatory attitudes towards pregnant embodiment. Consequently, my project assumes this calculated anachronism by reading pregnant embodiment in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII* using the above modern methodological framework.

**Rachel Clark, Wartburg College**

"Witchcraft as Disability Structure in Early Modern England"

In William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton*, the devil takes the form of a black dog in order to claim Elizabeth Sawyer's soul and transform her into a witch. This character, called only Dog, talks and plays pranks and delights in the mischief that he causes. He has some traits in common with Marlowe's Mephistophilis: he tempts Sawyer to evil and is limited to menial harms. He is never as threatening as Mephistophilis, though, not least because he is, after all, a talking dog. Yet his role in the play is essential to its development of Mother Sawyer's character, both her choice to claim the identity of witch and her ability to cause harm. In this augmentation of her choices, and in his prosthetic relationship to Mother Sawyer, Dog highlights the similarities between a witch's familiar and a service animal. In this paper, I argue that witchcraft in early modern England is structured like disability and raises similar questions about ability. As a case study, I analyze the relationship between Mother Sawyer and Dog to illustrate that if we consider witchcraft as a disability structure, we can extend understandings of both witchcraft and disability in the period.

**Deyasini Dasgupta, Syracuse University**

"What Strange New Motions Do I Feel?: *Love's Cure*, the Ethics of Care, and the Performance of Normalcy"

In my paper, I attempt a reading of hermaphroditism in relation to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "habitual body." Locating the habitual body in *Love's Cure*, a play by Beaumont and Fletcher, I try to navigate the early modern anxiety over gender dysphoria, monstrosity, and the "cure" for non-normative gender representation. In doing so, I argue that the play's depiction of "feminine" care and its juxtaposition against "masculine" ability through the figure of the hermaphrodite deliberately blurs the lines between "habit" and "custom." My reading hinges on three main ideas: a reading of gender

not with but *as* disability, the identification of action/inaction, and the notion of “strange”-ness. Thus, when Lucio asks in the play, “What strange new motions do I feel? My veins/ Burn with an unknown fire: in every part/ I suffer alteration: I am poisoned”(2166-2168), “he” highlights not only the “poison” of this love-cure, but also the “strange”-ness of the affections and alterations faced by the habitual body. By drawing attention to such “new” but strange alterations, *Love’s Cure* demonstrates not just a pseudo-medical erasure of difference but also a cultural interest in prescribing one’s place in the world. In other words, my work demonstrates how the play’s oscillations between “care” and “cure” ultimately defines the relationship between gender and ability/dis-ability as one that is not based on essentialist conditions but rather *multiple* cultural scripts that depend upon audience complicity.

**Miles Drawdy, University of California, Berkeley**

“Shakespeare’s Ideal Comedy: Aesthetics and Deformity in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”

In this essay, I reconsider *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as, in Hugh Grady’s words, “one of Shakespeare’s fullest explorations of aesthetic ideas” by returning first to the antitheatrical arguments of 19<sup>th</sup> century literary critics who argued that Shakespeare’s most delightful comedy is also his most beautiful—“ideal,” even. These critics—Hazlitt, Lamb, Schlegel, Swinburne—insisted that the pleasure and the beauty of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is immaterial, ineffable, bodiless. Invoking Tobin Siebers’ theory of disability aesthetics and his productive explanation that “[t]he human body is both the subject and object of aesthetic production,” I argue that the aesthetic within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is not limited to its lyricism or its metaphysics but, rather, is materialized in the production and reproduction of beautiful bodies. Further, I argue that Shakespeare’s comedy—very much like Philip Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry*—enacts a radical collapse of aesthetics from a theory predicated upon formal diversity to one defined in opposition to deformity. This process culminates in Oberon’s premonition and promise that, “Never mole, hare-lip, nor scar, / Nor mark prodigious such as are / Despised in nativity, / Shall upon their children be.” The essay tentatively suggests that this investment in beautiful bodies is characteristic of Shakespeare’s early comedies.

**Leslie Dunn, Vassar College**

“Disabling Caliban”

In the “Names of the Actors” that follows *The Tempest* in the First Folio, Caliban is described as a “savage and deformed slave,” yet the exact nature of his deformity is never specified in the play text. He is called a series of dehumanizing epithets, including “freckled whelp,” “strange fish,” “puppy-headed monster,” and “mooncalf,” all of which suggest some sort of congenital defect. Prospero describes him as “misshapen” and “disproportioned.” But unlike Richard III, who details his own deformities, Caliban never speaks of his body (except when describing Prospero’s “torment” of it), and his physical form remains ambiguous. In this paper I bring the perspectives of disability studies and postcolonial studies together by pressing on the words “deformed” and “deformity” as they appear in early modern travel narratives, in order to show how deformity and savagery were linked in the early modern imagination. I also consider how Caliban’s deformity might have been staged through the use of blackface makeup, gestures and movements that associated him with both allegorical figures of evil and contemporary representations of Africans. Finally, I turn to the third term in Caliban’s description, “slave,” which unlike his alleged deformity is clearly represented in the

play. For modern interpreters, the disabling effects of slavery under British colonialism are a subtext for Prospero's domination of Caliban through physical violence, as well as his assumption that Caliban is less than fully human, a "thing of darkness." The conjunction of "savage" and "deformed" in Caliban's description thus echoes an emerging ideology in which racism and ableism conjoined to justify the institution of slavery, as well as the literal deforming of black bodies.

**Penelope Geng, Macalester College**

"Precarious Ability: Ablenationalism in English Common Law and *King Lear*"

What can Edmund's story in *King Lear* tell us about the relationship between precarity and ability? How does his desire to be land-secure reflect commonplace cultural ideals of bodymind normativity? To answer these questions, I look at seventeenth-century English jurists' writing of the legal character of the male, white, and able landowner. In their commentaries on inheritance, jurists such as Sir John Davies and Sir Matthew Hale frequently staged crises of individual and national debility to justify both the custom of primogeniture and the English possession (colonization) of lands, territories, and kingdoms which adhered to communal forms of property ownership. Although English tenurial law is a deeply studied subject in legal historiography (and Shakespeare and law scholarship), I argue that its "prosthetic" and "ablenationalist" tactical deployment of the fantasy of precarity, disability, and debility has slipped under our collective radar. The drama of possession and dispossession is obviously central to *King Lear*, but no character better exemplifies the tragic consequences of what I call "precarious ability" than Edmund. Rejecting his abject condition of bastardy, Edmund embraces and embodies ablenationalist values even at the expense of his personal flourishing.

**John Gullede, Emory University**

"Prosthetic Humor: Laughing with/at Cripple in *Fair Maid of the Exchange*"

In this paper, I draw together various archival, theoretical, medical, and dramatic texts to tease out the ways in which early modern people experienced—indeed *felt*—disability as a performance of identity. Paying close attention to laughter, rather than the unit of "the joke" or the production of comedy writ large, this essay bypasses abstractions of humor by turning imaginative texts into experimental sites where potentialities of laughter are fleshed out. The main literary focus is placed on the 1607 play by Thomas Heywood, *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*, which features the character "Cripple" as its source of humor, unity of plot, and aesthetic fulfillment. Most research surrounding comedy and disability treat the pair as an indecorous and abjecting cruelty. While I think this is a worthwhile and still under-researched aspect of early and pre-modern humor, the project of this paper is one of speculative reparation. Through disability performances that are meant to provoke laughter, lines between audience/performer, self/other are momentarily suspended, and forms of communal access are granted, which for a number of reasons, may be less readily felt in modern contexts. As a methodological marriage between literary analysis and cognitive science, I agree very much with Eugenie Brinkema's *The Form of the Affects*, wherein she insists on using close-reading as a strategy by which to uncover the formal dimensions of *feeling*—a method of inquiry I apply to my reading of early modern performance. What I want to stress about this approach to investigating the role of laughter in theatrical practice is the pre-linguistic connectivity which gives rise to social and cultural bonds. In my estimation, this is another way of thinking about "access." How do we access the other, which may be another way of asking, how do we lose the self?

**Nicholas R. Helms, Plymouth State University**

“Not for an Age, but for Autistics”

Normative cognition (aka neurotypicality) is constructed in part--in the early modern period and in our own--through gender essentialism and sexist stereotypes. I'll be making this argument by building a commonplace compilation of sorts, pairing autobiographical descriptions of neurodivergence with similar utterances from Shakespeare's women characters. My goal here is of course not to diagnose early modern characters, but rather to find places where contemporary neurodivergents might read their ancestors into early modern plays. If ableism and sexism can echo from century to century, might not activism and resistance find ways to do the same? For my part, I want to attempt this trace by matching contemporary neurodivergent perspectives to the perspectives of early modern characters. Given my own identity as an autistic person and the constraints of word count, these neurodivergent perspectives are also all autistic perspectives. In future work (mine and others!), I hope that my method can be replicated for all shades of neurodivergence. I turn to Shakespeare to find early modern echoes of these perspectives, all in hopes of excavating centuries-old resistance to the longstanding and ongoing oppression of neurotypicality.

**Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik, University of Lodz**

“Not Honour'd with a Human Shape': Malignant Things, Skin-Deep (I)error and the Promise of the Monstrous in *The Tempest*”

This paper discusses the significance of skin for representing dis/ability of Caliban in chosen Polish performances of the play and its tradaptations in the form of graphic novels and films; these are are screened for the occurrences of accidental, optional and obligatory intertextuality which approach skin condition as a marker of disease/dis/ability and therefore serve as a way of signalling dis/ability of the “deformed slave.” The paper address the possible reasons for and the consequences of such a recontextualization that pushes Caliban into the realm of the pathological. In the first part of the paper I briefly outline the link between the normal and the pathological in utopian scenarios and reflect on the discourse of the pathological in Shakespeare's play; in the second I discuss the norm and the normative, especially in medical epistemology, from the perspective of Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of the “abnormal.” The third part of the paper provides a brief analysis of disease and disability as one of the defining features of Caliban in a number of relatively recent theatrical productions and films, including Julie Tymor's *The Tempest*, but also in *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016) and *Logan* (2017).

**Kelsey Ridge, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK**

“This Ended Action?: Reading PTSD In Much Ado About Nothing”

While Claudio is often noted critically for his sexual jealousy, this reading focuses instead with his pervasive mistrust. It questions what a reading informed by trauma theory can reveal the origin of Claudio's problems and how awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder reframes *Much Ado About Nothing*, particularly Claudio's aggressive distrust of others, even his brothers-in-arms. The aim of this paper is not to argue that Shakespeare intended to write PTSD into *Much Ado* but rather to examine what the play looks like if trauma and PTSD are placed at the core of the Hero/Claudio narrative. This discussion begins by briefly examining the presence and absence of PTSD and war trauma in the critical and performance history of *Much Ado About Nothing*. It examines how Claudio has been figured

in terms of his ability throughout the text. It presents potential traumatic origins of Claudio's mental condition, particularly the recent war and psychological theories about the effect of living among unpunished perpetrators in post-conflict communities. Then it examines evidence, particularly symptomology, for this reading. This includes both textual evidence and symptoms that would only be present in a production. Finally, it addresses the role of society and culture in Claudio's situation, particularly the extent to which characters are unwilling to discuss the recent war and its possible ramifications.

**Melanie Rio, University of Maryland**

“Bride-habited and maiden-hearted: Desire and Disability in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *The Fair Maid of the West*”

The two parts of Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West*, written between 1597-1600 and shortly before their publication in 1631, have puzzled scholars with their uneven presentation of the titular heroine, Bess Bridges. Some attribute her transformation from cross-dressing pirate to damsel in distress to the gendered/racialized ideology of England's nascent imperial project, while others blame the “mythicized monarchy and self-idealizations” of Charles and Henrietta Maria for the socially conservative turn taken in Part 2. However, I want to propose an alternative reading of Bridges's character which reconciles these differences without recourse to elaborate geopolitical metaphor. By triangulating readings of both parts of *Fair Maid* with Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Two Noble Kinsmen*, written between Heywood's two plays, I aim to illustrate how circulations of desire and disability in the early modern community construct an understanding of female adolescence as a dangerous transition between two states of socio-sexual powerlessness: maidenhood and marriage.

**Nicole Sheriko, Rutgers University**

“Acting Naturally: Imitation, Disability, and the History of Stage Clowning”

“Acting Naturally: Imitation, Disability, and the History of Stage Clowning” reconstructs how stage clowns appropriated the behaviors of disabled entertainers. It complicates an old division between artificial and natural fools that the Renaissance inherits from the medieval period by insisting that they are mutually constitutive identities with shared performance practices. Artificial fools, fools by art, are intentionally foolish abled actors. Natural fools, fools by nature, are unintentionally foolish disabled entertainers. I argue that the stage clown's characteristic interpretive and imitative modes of performance are indebted to natural fools. *The History of the Two Maids of Moreclacke* by celebrity clown Robert Armin illustrates how his theory of acting is built around a natural-artificial negotiation. The performance of clown actor William Robbins in *The Changeling* further demonstrates how the artificial fool's metatheatrical stance as a deliberate imitator helps to mitigate the threat of collapsing artificial and imitated natural together but does not entirely succeed. Both plays use the theatrical challenge of disguise to exaggerate their imitated disabilities and to showcase such careful performance as a form of virtuosity. The conditions of this virtuosity help produce stage clowns' celebrity, but both processes function by erasing their original sources, the natural fools. Imitative practice has consequences for writing history.