

Shakespeare's "Other Disability Plays": Continued

Shakespeare Association of America 2022 Annual Meeting

Auditors should visit saa2021.premoderndisability.com to register for access to seminar information and materials. If you have trouble with the site, email ljonespierce@centenary.edu.

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"It's like dancing about architecture": Towards an Interpretation of the ProTactile Theater Institute's *Romeo and Juliet*

Most discussions of ProTactile Theater Institute's 2018 production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at Gallaudet University celebrate its novelty and compare it to examples of avant-garde theatre. Little has been written, however, that aims to interpret the performance of PTTI's production itself or to ask what this *Romeo and Juliet* might help us to analyze in Shakespeare's Elizabethan text. Put simply, while references to DeafBlind theatre have begun to trickle into Shakespeare studies journals, actual literary or performance analyses—as far as I have observed—have not been done. This seminar paper, therefore, is meant to function as a call for more analytical work by Shakespeareans on PTTI's *Romeo and Juliet*. Beyond the fact that using the tools of literary and dramatic analysis to discuss this production would doubtlessly expand our understanding of Shakespeare studies and adjacent fields, continuing to only discuss DeafBlind theatre in terms of its novelty and connections to avant-garde techniques may in fact prove a hindrance to critical discussion. Certainly DeafBlind theatre *does* challenge everything that sighted and hearing-focused Shakespeare studies assumes about literature and drama, but I want to suggest that moving beyond this absolute position is crucial to surpassing a response of amazement at the fact that DeafBlind people are actually doing theatre. Like Benvolio speaking to Romeo, I am asking us as Shakespeareans to "stand not amazed" (3.1.133) at PTTI's production, but rather to do what we do best: reading and interpreting critically.

Simone Chess, Wayne State University

Faking It: Sex, Disability, and Sprezzatura

This essay discusses *faking it*—where "it" is normalcy and knowledge—as an assistive technology invented and put to use by disabled people, people having sex, and disabled people having sex. In *Monstrous Kinds* (2019), Elizabeth Bearden uses Castiglione's courtly idea of *sprezzatura* as a way to talk about disability strategies and techniques for passing as able-bodied. Bearden reads *sprezzatura*—including the ability to underplay or hide one's disabilities—as a social technology for conforming to the ideals of courtly civility. I want to build on Bearden's thinking about *sprezzatura* as a social prosthesis that disabled people might use to generate the appearance of ease, typicality, or normalcy by putting it in conversation with similar techniques used in feigning know-how and normalcy in sexual encounters.

In “Practicing Sex” (*JEMCS* 2019), Joey Gamble reads pornographic texts in the same way Bearden reads courtly texts—as instructional guides that at once set a target for normalcy and advise their readers in how to fake it through training, technique, and trial and error. What the guides show, in both cases, is the tremendous range of debilities and knowledge gaps that are *built in* to the production of normalcy, and the related proliferation of techniques and technologies—social and material prostheses and assistive tools—that are not exceptions to normalcy but instead at the heart of it, both enforcing and undermining it. This work, while centering the knowledge and methods of disabled people (now and in the early modern period), outlines how disability practices and epistemological approaches are in fact shaping assistive strategies that are used by pretty much everyone.

Ari Friedlander, University of Mississippi

“The Signification of the word Impotent”: Disability, Labor, and Philology in the Poor Laws
In *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*, Alison Hobgood and David Wood write that early modern scholarship has historicized disability in at least two ways: first, it has shown that “disability” was already an “operational identity category” before 19th-century ideas about normativity; and second, it has demonstrated that representations of disability in pre- and early modernity were not generally limited to discourses of deformity and monstrosity, as some influential scholars had previously claimed. This essay contributes to this burgeoning critical movement by providing a philological inquiry into the language of this “operational identity category,” fleshing out our ideas about how the early modern disabled body was constructed. I contend that the Elizabethan poor laws spurred an effort to legally define disability, called “impotence” in the language of the period, as an identity that comprised both embodied and social characteristics, but was not reducible to either category. In its exploration of the relationship between philology and social history on one hand, and of queer theory, disability theory and the history of sexuality and disability on the other, this essay grafts disability studies to what Jeffrey Masten has termed queer philology. Following Robert McRuer’s study of queer theory and disability, *Crip Theory*, we might call this a “crip philology,” in which philology recovers how able and disabled bodies are discursively constructed, and how the practice of philology, in law and other domains, has itself been used to normativize certain bodies and render others abject.

Melissa H. Geil, University of North Carolina

Much Ado About Masking: Castiglione, Social Camouflaging, and Villainy

Students encountering *Much Ado* in college often find the play framed through the new historicist lens of Stephen Greenblatt’s introduction in the *Norton Anthology of Shakespeare*, which focuses on the concept of “social labor” and its visibility in the discourses the play contains. Coming back to *Much Ado* after several years, I was struck by the inability and, in particular, the unwillingness I read in some characters to go along with social mores. *Much Ado*’s conceits revolve around the belief that emotions are legible and vulnerable to manipulation. Yet no one knows what to do with Don John. He’s an outcast, and he refuses to be anything other than he is. It’s not that Don John can’t assimilate; he refuses to unless it serves his purposes. And in a play that works to find a tidy ending, there is none for Don John. He is the lacuna at the end of the play, the thing we don’t know what to do with and so put off until tomorrow. I bring up this reading of the play not to suggest that Don John is neurodivergent—thought here may be something to that—but to emphasize a parallel conversation happening in autistic and neurodivergent communities on resisting and pushing back against social camouflaging. Don John’s call to stop masking and playing along with social games could be a useful way to read into some of the

other lacunae in Shakespeare's plays and to offer some perspective into the way we, as early modern scholars, interact with one another.

Penelope H. Geng, Macalester College

Refusing Ablenationalism and Normative Citizenship: *Timon of Athens*

Written sometime between 1604 and 1607, the story of Timon as told by Shakespeare and Middleton is not only a story of one man's descent into madness and misanthropy, but a complex meditation on what it means to *refuse* citizenship or political assimilation into the city-state. In contrast to Lucian's Timon, Shakespeare and Middleton's character possesses an unassimilated and unassimilable disability identity. This play offers us a timeless (and timely) rumination on the radical power of refusal of able-bodied citizenship.

Nicholas R. Helms, Plymouth State University

Making the Blue One Red: Watersheds, Bloodshed, and Disabled Identity in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Given the sympathetic, humoral relationships in the early modern period between both cognitive and bodily health and the environment, to what extent might we speak of minds, bodies, *and* landscapes as disabled? This speculative connection is raised multiple times in *Macbeth*: Banquo likens the witches to the elements, saying, "The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them" (1.3.82-3); Macbeth applies medicine to the body politic, asking, "If thou couldst, doctor, cast / The water of my land, find her disease, / And purge it to a sound and pristine health" (5.3.62-4); and Macbeth's cumulative violence takes the form of an embodied watershed, dripping from bloodied hands to Scotland's soil—"it weeps, it bleeds" (4.3.50) – and finally flowing to the "multitudinous seas," which it will "incarnadine, / Making the green one red" (2.2.79-80). From a cultural perspective, one type of relationship that often distinguishes disabled identities from non-disabled identities is care networks (see Justin Shaw's work in *Early Theatre* 2019). Disabled folks are necessarily interconnected, enmeshed in networks of care, and aware of their interdependence with others. Non-disabled folks may instead live by the assumption of hyper-ability: that they are individual, independent, and radically free. Macbeth's campaign of violence shows us his own belief and hyper-ability—to be "so much more the man"—and makes a bloody watershed of Scotland. *Macbeth* shows us the fantasy of hyper-able violence wreaking havoc on a disabled land. Scotland cries out for care, showing us the necessity of interdependence at all levels of being.

Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik, University of Lodz

"I'll sweat and seek about for eases, / And at that time bequeath you my diseases": Syphilitic Transactions in *Troilus and Cressida*

This essay examines syphilis in *Troilus and Cressida*, discussing its metaphorical significance for the overall tenor of the play and the nature of the interactions between the characters. A bone-remodeling disease, whose virulence since its first occurrence in 1495 has been subject to much scrutiny, syphilis has a rich literary legacy. In *Troilus and Cressida*, allusions to "the pox" add to the imagery of disintegration and an overall sense of corruption, decay and disgust, further strengthened by recourse to "hybrid" figures of "women impudent and mannish" and "effeminate men" who fail to live up to the impossible ideals of feminine chastity and male virtue. I look closely at the figure of Pandarus, who admits to his condition in the play and whose portrayal in some 20th-century productions relies on the

disabling effects of age, sexual orientation (sic) and disease. Here I focus specifically on the representation of Pandarus as a syphilitic drag-queen (sic) in the 1996 RSC production directed by Ian Judge.

Emily Macleod, George Washington University

Amorphus and Childish “Deformity” in Jonson’s Cynthia’s Revels

Ben Jonson’s *Cynthia’s Revels* was one of the first plays performed by the Children of the Chapel, a company of young boys that started performing at the indoor Blackfriar’s playhouse circa 1600. As such, it establishes a company that would continue to show off their skills through the physical, vocal, musical, and spectacular demands of playwrights who wrote for them. Playwrights like Jonson capitalized on contradictory perceptions of children’s bodies as tender and experienced, pure and sexually desirable, and altogether not quite human, or at least not quite male. This paper explores the character of Amorphus—whose name suggests a formlessness similar to that of the child actor—in relation to the boy player who first embodied him and how perceptions of his ability are linked with ideas about his form or shape. By engaging with theories of disability and performance in reference to the characterization of Amorphus and his portrayal by a child actor, I hope to build on early modern performance and disability scholarship and expand our idea of what it means to be called “deformed” on the early modern stage.

Cameron H. McNabb, Southeastern University

Dramatic Prosthesis: Embodying Disability in Lear

This essay is part of a chapter on *King Lear* that will be included in my monograph *Dramatic Prosthesis: Drama and Disability Studies*. I argue that just as textual narratives rely on disability for plot and metaphor—a narrative prosthesis—theater as a medium writ large is inherently in need of prosthetics (bodies and materials) to achieve mimesis. While current disability readings of *Lear* are insightful, they still rely on critical approaches that focus on the narrative text without capturing the embodied significations of disability on a stage or the embodied reception of those significations by the audience. Performances of *Lear* rely on the prosthesis of embodiment to stage disabilities, and such embodiment provides avenues for meaningful depictions, interpretations, and even experiences of disability. How do analyses change when we pay attention to the embodied staging of disability? How do the material aspects of the theater—especially the theatrical bodies of actors and audience members—contribute to how disability is physically, culturally, and narratively constructed? I argue that attending to how disability is embodied, performed, and received in *Lear* offers more multivalent interpretations of disability, beyond pathetic, embarrassing exploitation and fractured conclusions.

Kelsey Ridge, Warminster, PA

The Absence of PTSD in Troilus and Cressida

This essay examines Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* with an eye to its lapsed warrior hero Achilles. An early modern audience would have inherited two notions of Achilles seemingly at odds: the impressive demi-god about whose rage Homer sang, and the brutal warlord who killed and desecrated the noble Hector. Shakespeare’s departure from his source texts has been thoroughly discussed, but not in terms of trauma and disability. This essay reveals how Shakespeare removed signs and symptoms of trauma that other scholars have identified in Shakespeare’s source texts and argues that these alterations reflect Shakespeare’s unheroic approach to the narrative of the war. In Shakespeare’s

version of events, Achilles' justifications and trauma are stripped away to underscore the pettiness of the conflict and leave Achilles as small as those around him.

Nicole Sheriko, Christ's College, Cambridge

Acting Naturally: Imitation, Disability, and Clownish Skill

This essay builds on my work for last year's seminar. It reconstructs how stage clowns appropriated the behaviors of disabled entertainers by looking at the relationship between artificial and natural fools. Artificial fools included celebrity stage clowns, whereas natural fools tended to include performers with mental disabilities, but the categories are mutually constitutive. I elaborate an oft-suggested but never explained theory that stage clowns based their performances on natural fools by turning to Robert Armin's *The History of the Two Maids of Moreclacke* and William Robbins' performance in *The Changeling*. I focus in part on how the imitative practices of artificial fools obscure their roots in natural fools in the process of building celebrity identity and how this obfuscation affects theater history. In the intervening year, I have reworked the essay and am now especially interested in a history not just of clowning but of how we produce and describe actorly skill.

Eileen Sperry, SUNY Empire State College

You Can Never Be Old

As suggested by Jacques's seven ages of men speech in the forest of Arden, there was no shortage of commonplace beliefs about what it meant to grow up and grow old in early modern England. To be childish, to be youthful, to be senile—all of these were understood as discrete phases of life, correspondent with distinct social roles and forms of embodiment. This essay explores youthfulness. In Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the poet emphasizes, to the point of obsession, the youthfulness of his beloved, so much so that the anonymous lover has come to be defined by that feature. That emphasis is not only a gesture toward Petrarchan standards of beauty but also, in crucial ways, an emphasis on ability. In this essay, I trace Shakespeare's characterization of youthfulness as a paradigm of ability and ablebodiedness and consider what the presence of ability implies about the threat of disability. The poet imagines the loss of youth—both for the young man and for himself—as an impairment, a process of disabling. I suggest that the way the *Sonnets* articulate an idealization of youth becomes an opportunity to explore the anxiety about its loss, an anxiety about the impairments of age and dying.