

SAA 2023: Pedagogies of Premodern Disability (S23)
Abstracts

Seminar Leaders: **Katherine Schaap Williams, University of Toronto**
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Anachronism and disability: productive or reductive?

My paper reflects on recent debates about anachronism and presentism in disability studies. Literary-historical studies has long grappled with the appropriateness (or otherwise) of using ‘disability’ as a term to describe bodily states in the past, given that this term was not widely used until after the early modern period. That struggle is now extended to concepts such as ‘disability gain’, which appear to have parallels in the early modern period, but are problematic when viewed in the round (what early modern people ‘gain’ from bodily difference in one area, they often lose in another). My own work with historical and contemporary narratives around non-suicidal self-injury highlights this dilemma; early modern narratives help de-pathologise NSSI, but this work is undertaken within safeguarding parameters that continue to position NSSI as unsafe and unhealthy.

Katey Roden, Gonzaga University

Teaching Feminist Disability Studies in Early Modern Women’s Writing, a Fruitful Praxis

My paper reflects upon the value of inviting students to read devotional poetry and prose through the lens of Feminist Disability Studies in an Early Modern Women’s Writing Course. Introducing students to moral/religious models of disability in direct relation to gendered imperatives to reproduce that associated reproductive ability with spiritual ability provides students with a critical framework to explore the prosthetic capacities and materiality of metaphor for early modern women struggling with reproductive health and ability. By participating in the recovery of disabled women’s lived experiences and social conditions in devotional writing, students are able to not only develop a rich understanding of disability as a form of human diversity, but also draw parallels between early modern constructions of the ideal female body and current reproductive justice issues.

Shaun Nowicki, University of California, Santa Barbara

Disability Poetics and the Problem of Presentism in the Premodern

Historically, one of the central concerns of premodern disability studies has been the portability of disability as a conceptual category between modern and premodern worlds. This module serves as an adaptable introduction to one facet of the larger critical conversations by pairing selections from John Milton with disability poetics scholarship and poetry from contemporary disabled writers. The module also aims to place scholarly contributions to critical disability studies alongside creative/critical writing contemporary disabled poets to build out capacious and lively definitions of disability poetics. This module also aims to generate student discussion about the usefulness of “writing back” to premodern texts with disability in mind. In thinking through these specific issues, I also consider how we might situate conversations about disability

and presentism in the different pedagogical contexts of early modern literature survey courses and disability studies seminars.

Emily L. Loney, Bucknell University

Reading “Maimed” Books: Reading and Teaching Disability in Renaissance Literature

The title of my paper, “Reading ‘Maimed’ Books,” references the introductory material to Shakespeare’s First Folio, in which the editors dismiss the previously published plays that had entered the marketplace before the ostensibly more polished Folio publication, by explaining that those earlier printed plays were “maimed and deformed” and contrasting those early publications with the new-and-improved Folio play texts that are “cured and perfect of their limbs.” “Maimed” here of course is a metaphor not an embodied experience, but Heminge and Condell use the term because they expect their readers to have preconceptions and prejudices about the hypothetical “maimed” body. Reading the “maimed” book in the context of critical disability studies, my paper will consider how these sorts of descriptions register with the eugenic logics used by nineteenth-century philologists and textual editors who were attempting to reconstruct the “family trees” of manuscripts in order to find the “most whole” or “most perfect” version of a text. My paper will consider the intersections between disability discourse and print culture in the early modern period, and it will invite us to consider the stakes of how we teach the idea of the unstable and variant texts of *Richard III* or *The Faerie Queene* or *Hamlet* to students, even as we ask them to think about the representation of disability in those texts themselves.

Christine M. Gottlieb, California State University, East Bay

Healing Lear: Pedagogies of Care in *King Lear*

Amid the explicit cruelty and violence of *King Lear*, the play is concerned with teaching an ethics of care. This thread occurs in several places, but centers on Lear himself. Lear learns both to care for others and to accept the care of others. The play’s pedagogy of care is deeply intertwined with its representation of disability. *King Lear* includes biomedical and psychosocial interpretations of Lear’s madness, ultimately highlighting the psychosocial dimensions of mental health. Care is shown to be central to Lear’s healing in the scene of his reunion with Cordelia (4.7). Despite the play’s overwhelmingly tragic conclusion, Act 4 Scene 7 remains a scene that highlights an ethics of care, with significant implications for incorporating Disability Studies pedagogy into classroom discussions of the play.

Simone Chess, Wayne State University

Intimacy, Care, Sex, and Disability

This teaching module is an effort to imagine a course that would explore intersections of disability, sex, and care in early modern contexts. The module is an effort to bring foundational concepts in disability studies—intimacy and access intimacy, care and collective care—more completely into our work in premodern disability and sexuality studies, with special attention to modern *and* premodern queer and disability strategies for survival and joy. The module is designed with three units (intimacy, care, sex), each pairing public-facing disability scholarship with early modern texts. The module includes some brief reflections on what I set out to

accomplish, what about it might work, and where I think there are still pedagogical and scholarly gaps around this area of early modern disability studies.

RaNelle Bradley, New York University

Banquo's Question, Mental Disability, and the Lack of Diagnosis in *Shakespeare's Macbeth*

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Banquo struggles with the uncertainty of whether he and Macbeth have gone mad. After their encounter with the witches Banquo asks Macbeth for clarification: "Were such things here as we do speak about? Or have we eaten on the insane root, / That takes the reason prisoner?" (I.iii. 84-86 emphasis added). In his question about madness, Banquo asks for a diagnosis, for confirmation of whether they have gone mad; however, Macbeth responds with silence. In this moment of the text, madness is posed as a question and the play resists diagnosis as an answer. In *Mad at School* Margaret Price's theorization of "counter-diagnosis" exposes how the use of pronouns in mental disability autobiographies challenge the oppressiveness of psychiatric diagnostic practices. Price's theory encourages us to consider the implications of Banquo's use of "we" in his question about madness, and the play allows us to examine how the early modern drama genre presents its own challenge to medical diagnosis in a way slightly different from Price's "counter-diagnosis" found in the autobiographical genre. When we refuse to define mental disability through diagnosis, then what are we left with? The silence after Banquo's question to Macbeth leaves us in a realm of questioning and confusion. Pedagogically, students can be encouraged to remain in the uncomfortable realm of questioning during a close reading and/or discussion of a text in the classroom.

Maureen McDonnell, Eastern Connecticut State University

Prophetic Gestures: Sinister Sign Language in *Macbeth*

In their recent production of *Macbeth*, the Flock Theatre company chose to have their supernatural characters use Sign Language. The deployment of American Sign Language (ASL) by the witches and Hecate was not only visually arresting, but also altered the performative and prophetic elements of these weyward characters. This language use emphasized the willful precarity of the title character, as Macbeth – a non-signer – pursued his self-directed interpretation of ASL prophecies. By presenting a visual language as the primary catalyst for manipulating others, the production resisted literary and performance traditions of presenting ASL-users in service to the hearing, sonic world. In this particular Scotland, ASL subverted any fantasies of Deaf- or Deaf-affiliated submissiveness: instead, ASL became the source language for successful trafficking in evil. The choice to present Macbeth as a monolingual protagonist dismissive of the signers and their language underscored how his lack of linguistic humility made him an object for their agendas. This heteroglossic production, in which a projected script accommodated playgoers unfamiliar with ASL, underscores the aesthetic richness of visual languages in performance. This paper considers Flock Theatre's innovation and its relevance to contemporary debates about representation, as well as the ways in which visual languages might re-script early modern anxieties about witchcraft and women's capacity to harm.