

Dis/Ability and Racial Capitalism in Shakespeare and Beyond

Susan Anderson SAA 2024 Abstract

Familial networks and discourses of supremacy in the London Lord Mayors' shows

This paper will examine the way early modern London Lord Mayors' Shows articulated power, merit, and virtue through a language of praise based on whiteness, ability and nationhood, and which was flexible enough to both co-opt and reject labor to suit the particular moment. This built upon chauvinism to establish an intersected class-race-ability nexus that reverse-engineers the privileged position occupied by the merchant traders of the London elite as being evidence of their inherent superiority.

Case study: Maurice Abbot was the Lord Mayor honored by Heywood's show *Porta Pietatis* (1638). I see his embeddedness in imbricated networks of family, trade, and politics as typical of the frameworks that make possible the celebration of individual virtue in the shows. I want to outline a microhistory of Abbot's intergenerational and interfamilial ties to exemplify how such connectivity underlies the shows' poetic representations of merit.

I then want to trace the aesthetic, moral, and racial confluences the shows draw on in terms of whiteness/fairness and darkness (following Kim Hall's insights on the operation of this discourse), to excavate the shows' implicit and explicit justification of the extractive economic dominance of certain social groups over others (identified by somatic features that do not map neatly onto modern notions of heredity). By attending to these examples of public praise from the early stages of England's expansion of imperial trade and conquest, we can identify the roots of what is publicly sayable about hierarchy, rights, population groups, and national borders that reifies the inequities underpinning injustice.

“We Must Coin:” Normativity and Properties of Whiteness in Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*

In “Bastardy, Counterfeiting, and Misogyny in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,” Michael Neill identifies an impulse to associate “bastards” and “revengers” within a system of economic and sexual exchanges that “punningly imagines [revenge] as yet another spurious adulteration of currency.”¹ This essay, though nearly four decades old now, provides an important glimpse into the “destabilization of identity characteristic of a world of bastard coining” and the instrumentalization of “courtly counterfeiting and corruption.” It presents a particularly productive theory of commercial capital and social mobility that depends on sexual and moral continence. Yet, even as it draws attention to such statements as, “And if we list we could have nobles clipped / And go for less than beggars,” it fails to acknowledge the complex inheritances of racial normativity, disability knowledges, and capitalistic structures that become intertwined in this play. The language of “nobles clipped” and “going for less than beggars,” in particular, can be read as either economic debasement, or quite literally, as a debilitation that negotiates and affirms the value of (or, conversely, devalues) certain “objects”. In my paper, therefore, I plan to interrogate the various “scripts” that generate fictions of identity in the premodern world. By considering normativity as a property of whiteness, I hope to better understand the conditional acceptance or erasure of certain bodyminds in this play, and in early modern England more broadly.

¹ Michael Neill, “Bastardy, Counterfeiting, and Misogyny in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring 1996), pp. 397-416, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/450955>.

Hotspur, Trauma and Disability in *1 Henry IV*

In the first scene between Hotspur and his wife (2.3), Lady Percy asks, in fairly explicit terms, why her husband isn't having sex with her. She notes that she has been banished from his bed for two weeks and asks what "it's that takes from thee / thy stomach, pleasure" (2.3.39-40) and "why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks / And given my treasures and my rights of thee / To thick-eyed musing" (2.3.43-45). Hotspur, for his part, is equally explicit about his lack of interest in sex. He tells her that he doesn't love her (2.3.87) and asserts, "This is no world / to play with marmets and to tilt with lips" (2.3.87-88). And yet, most productions depict this scene as sexually charged. In the 2014 RSC production, Percy flirts with Hotspur throughout, until Hotspur passionately kisses her; when he refuses to tell her his plans, she turns cold and angry. Despite the text clearly stating that Hotspur isn't sexually interested in her, the production turns her into a temptress, who tries to use his sexual desire to get what she wants. In the BBC Hollow Crown version, the scene ends with passionate (and slightly violent) makeup sex.

By depicting the two as a hetero-normative, aristocratic couple, I believe these productions erase Hotspur's disabled body. In this paper I will argue that Hotspur is suffering from, what we would call, erectile dysfunction, and his disability, within the text, is depicted as a direct result of war trauma or what we would call post-traumatic stress disorder. What is normally depicted as Hotspur's lack of interest in sex or women because of his preoccupation with war and other masculine endeavours is actually the physical embodiment of war trauma. In the first part of this paper, I will offer a close reading of this scene (2.3), utilizing trauma theory to trace the way the humoral language in the text registers Hotspur's trauma and sexual dysfunction, while exploring how his trauma reorients his class position and leads to the rejection of aristocratic values. In the second part, I will explore their next meeting at Glyndwr's house (3.1). Utilizing Alison Hobgood's theorizations about queer-crip sexuality, I will suggest that after Kate confronts him about his sexual dysfunction, Hotspur attempts to work within his disability by exploring a non-normative sex life, which includes oral sex, gender reversals and group sex. This reading of Hotspur, I hope, destabilizes his traditional role (developed in the 18th and 19th century) as the epitome of "traditional" masculinity, as it is understood through the lens of white supremacy and global capitalism. In place of this figure, I will present an individual whose war experience leads him to reject conventional aristocratic forms of masculinity and experiment with different embodied lives.

Monster-Gazing and Monsters Who Gaze Back: Caliban's Amorphous Defiance of Colonial Logics

In 1606, future bishop Geoffrey Goodman commented in a pamphlet that “[m]onsters are rare and seldom appear to us ... [although] Affrica be a fruitful mother of monsters” (Pender 97). Writing from England, Goodman links geography, race, and ethnicity to early modern societal ideas about monstrosity, simultaneously painting a binary opposition between Europe and Africa (respectively monster-free and monster-full) and playing into cultural sensationalizations of so-called monstrous births in England itself. Within this context, I will analyze the narrative of Sycorax's banishment from Algiers and Caliban's subsequent birth on the island of *The Tempest*, demonstrating how Prospero's language of “litter,” “freckled whelp,” and “hag-born” directly connect to histories of exceptional birth narratives in early modern England. Taking up monster theory's assertion that “the monstrous body is pure culture” (Cohen 1), I will then trace the language of monstrosity in early modern pamphlets and political tracts to situate the figure of Caliban at the convergence of cultural discourses on race, gender, and (dis)ability inflected with England's obsession with what Pender calls “monster-gazing” (114).

Furthermore, I will argue that in his amorphousness, his amphibious slippage between “strange fish” and “devil,” “hag-seed” and “tortoise,” Caliban represents a threat to the colonial logics espoused by Prospero, Miranda, and the freshly shipwrecked arrivants to the island. Like other cultural monsters, Caliban is incoherent to classifying structures, and his resistance to colonial subjugation renders its logics unstable. I will close with a case study of one of Caliban's subversive afterlives in theatre, Césaire's *A Tempest*, which delineates how Prospero's rhetoric is rooted in colonialism, exploitation, and anxiety over violations of the “natural order” upon which his worldview is founded. This postcolonial Caliban calls up an image of a constrained figure, mired with over-significations, in his accusation of Prospero: “you lied to me so much, / about the world, about myself, / that you ended up imposing on me / an image of myself: / underdeveloped” (61). In throwing off this externally enforced narrative and its fixity, he is able to exist outside imperial classification structures, and he sings of freedom as the island is peopled with opossums, wild boars, and other creatures in multitudes, a final image that rejects staticity in favour of amorphous and multiplicitous futures.

Works Cited

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Taylor Hare
Pennsylvania State University
taylorahare@gmail.com

Book Supports: Race, Disability, and *Milton's Poetical Works* (1855)

This essay investigates the publication history of the first tactile edition of John Milton's poems, using this book as a case study for understanding how race intersected with disability in the circulation of early modern literature among blind and low-vision readers in the nineteenth century. Published in 1855 in two volumes using raised Roman type, *Milton's Poetical Works* made *Paradise Lost* as well as *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*, *Comus*, and a selection of Milton's shorter poems available by touch for the first time. The edition owed its existence to the extraordinary efforts of a blind man named Morrison Heady, who traveled his home state of Kentucky as well as the eastern United States to raise money for its production. In addition to his commitment to providing access to Milton's poems in raised print, Heady was also an enslaver; the 1850 US federal census shows that he enslaved at least four people on his family's farm in Spencer County. Moreover, contemporary records suggest that Heady's efforts to raise funds for his edition of Milton were enabled by the skills and labor of at least one enslaved individual. Responding to this information about Heady's biography, this essay explores the legacy of racialized violence embodied in the 1855 *Poetical Works* and considers what this book—an object of disability access made possible by coerced labor—can teach us about early modern textual history.

Nicole A. Jacobs
California Polytechnic State University
San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
njacobs@calpoly.edu

Redeeming Vulcan/Hephaestus: Ben Jonson, Disability, and Innovation

Ben Jonson's posthumously printed "Execration Against Vulcan" (1640) recounts the author's experience of losing portions of his plays, poems, translations, and travel literature in a library fire in 1623. The poem, written as a Juvenalian satire in the mode of complaint, places blame for the loss of Jonson's intellectual labor on "thou lame god of fire" Vulcan. The scholarly tradition has frequently commented upon the use of humor in "Execration Against Vulcan" without acknowledging the ableist underpinnings of the poem's insults that target Vulcan's limb difference, birth anomalies, and rejection by other Roman gods. Critical disability studies has much to offer in interpreting this poem and the status of Vulcan (or Hephaestus, his Greek-god equivalent) in early modern England. This seminar paper examines competing notions of labor, race, class, productivity, and ingenuity in Jonson's "Execration Against Vulcan" while also seeking to remedy degrading stereotypes of Hephaestus's club feet within the tradition of literary disability studies. In the essay, I argue that the myths of Vulcan/Hephaestus offer an excellent point of entry for exploring how disability, bodily difference, and labor impact the ethics of human invention and technological interface.

Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik
University of Lodz
anna.kowalcze@uni.lodz.pl
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“Beaten Men from Beaten Races”: the “Caliban type”, Linguistic Imperialism and Translation as “Trans-Crip-t Time”

In the article theorizing the intersectionality of dis/ability, race and trans studies Alexandre Baril asks a series of questions that seem to be important for the discussion of disability and critical race theory: “What happens when linguistic oppression is conceptualized as potentially debilitating or a disability? What can be learned by approaching the connections between linguistic minorities and disabled communities from this perspective? How might this conceptualization contribute to solidarity between ethnic, linguistic, and disabled communities, as well as between d/Deaf and disabled people?” (164) In their argument Baril points to the parallelisms in the discussions of d/Deaf language and the situation of linguistic minorities signaling that they have in common the expectations of normalcy and that the distinction between them becomes often effectively blurred by the insistence on productivity and transparency of communication.

With this writing I return to *The Tempest* yet again, to discuss its potential for thinking about what Baril calls “trans-crip-t time”: to reflect on, on the one hand, linguistic imperialism in/of *The Tempest*, and on the other, the presence/absence/valence of dis/ability and race configurations in the interlingual translations of the play. In my discussion I hope to demonstrate to what extent linguistic minorities have been categorized as disabled owing to their diverse mastery of foreign language competence both within the play and its selected stage adaptations. I will also argue to what extent the trope of intellectual disability has been used in the case of Caliban to accentuate the alterity of the character who comes to act among the various agents present on the island in the capacity of a reluctant translator. This should allow me to think about the expensive, unproductive and unnecessary task of translation as a tool of crip resistance.

Works cited

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Fake It till You Make It: Aspiring to Whiteness in *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island* (1667)
Maya Mathur
University of Mary Washington

The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island (1667), the Restoration-era adaptation of *The Tempest* by John Dryden and William Davenant, makes significant changes to the marital and comic plots of its source. Dryden and Davenant endow Prospero with a second daughter, Dorinda, and makes him foster parent to Hippolito, the deposed Duke of Mantua who is abandoned on the island as an infant with Prospero and his daughters. The dramatists also add to the comic plot by dividing the commoners into two factions, the first comprising the mariners, Stephano, Ventoso, and Mustacho, and the second, Trincalo, Caliban, and Caliban's "sister-monster," Sycorax, an important addition to the text. These changes reduce the significance of Prospero's revenge while enhancing the romantic entanglements between two pairs of lovers and the ludic battle for control of the island.

Recent studies of *The Enchanted Island* by Katherine Schaap Williams and Noemie Ndiaye have shown that the play has much to interest scholars of premodern disability and critical race studies. This paper builds on Williams and Ndiaye's work by exploring the intersections of whiteness and dis/ability discourse in the text. I begin by tracing the construction of whiteness in the marital alliances between Savoy, Milan, and Mantua and consider the role of reproductive futurity to the process of elite race-making. Second, I examine the non-elite characters' claims to the island and consider the extent to which their views mimic the beliefs in reproductive futurity that shape elite discourse in the text. Broadly, I consider how reproductive futurity is central to the project of racial capitalism, understood here as the expropriation of resources through the naturalization of racial differentiation. Ultimately, I suggest that the differences between aristocrats and commoners are racialized in terms of their access to the means of social and sexual reproduction.

SAA 2024 abstract

Anandi Rao

Whose Shakespeare are we accessing when we access Shakespeare? Thinking with Translation and Disability Justice in Shakespeare studies.

A disability justice framework for translation requires an understanding of nuance, a comprehension that there are gradations of absence, of sanctuary, and of translation as a weapon. (Barokka 2022, 69)

Failures of access sometimes indicate failures of imagination — they may suggest that designers of the environment or programme have failed to imagine that a certain kind of person exists. (Loftis 2021, 8)

In my SAA paper I want to explore the notion of “access” in Shakespeare studies – pedagogy and thinking about translation of Shakespearean works – while centering disability justice race/caste politics. In many ways, the quotes above are starting points for me. Barokka is a Minang-Javanese artist and writer who, in her essay, “Right to Access, Right of Refusal: Translation of/as Absence, Sanctuary, Weapon” draws on colonial histories of extractive translation to “centre disability justice(s) as anti-colonial praxes” (Barokka 2022, 65). Sonya Freeman Loftis’s work is at the intersections of Shakespeare studies and disability studies and her book *Shakespeare and Disability Studies* argues that an understanding of the latter needs to be front and centre to make Shakespeare — performance and pedagogy — more accessible. For me Shakespeare in languages other than English is a “way to experience Shakespeare’s work that is different from the perceived norm” (Loftis 120) — the norm being the elevation of Shakespeare in Shakespearean English. But is this way to engage with literature specific to me, an individual, or is this indicative of a subculture of multilingual postcolonial selves, those living *in* translation? Staging my experience in parallel to Loftis’ is intentional; a way into the intersection between disability and translation, between disability and postcolonialism, between all three.

The Crone Wars: Gender Fluidity, Disability and Old Age in Early Modern Drama

The final decades of human life are defined by profound metamorphosis, especially when it comes to both ability and gender. Whatever the history of an individual's bodymind, old age includes impairment as bodies break down and become more susceptible to illness. Old age also includes gender fluidity, as fertility wanes, hormones shift, secondary sex characteristics dissipate, and habits of gender care become harder to maintain. In the twenty-first century U.S., we tend to elide the ability and gender transformations of old age in spite of their material conditions. Instead, we reinscribe late-in-life disability and gender fluidity—for better and for worse—as normalcy.

Depictions of old age in early modern English drama, however, offer us a different model. On the early modern stage, ableism and cis-normativity converged on elderly characters, violently resisting that fluidity and attempting to stabilize the elderly body by harming it. In this study, I explore the way early modern drama grappled with the constantly shifting physical, cognitive, and psychological states and shifting gender modes in the last decades of human life. Early modern theater showcases rather than underrates the disability and gender fluidity of elderly bodies. At the same time it also attempts to stabilize those changes through violence. The blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, the beating of Falstaff in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and the whole of Middleton, Rowley, and Massinger's geronticide comedy *The Old Law* demonstrate early modern elderly people's experience with violence, specifically on account of the way their bodies defied the myths of stability demanded by ableism and cis-normativity.

Lindsey Row-Heyveld
Luther College
lrh@luther.edu