SHAKESPEARE & DISABILITY

Disability Action Research Kollective

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INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare and his audiences understood their bodies within the frameworks that were available to them, as we do now. The most widely accepted way of understanding the body was as being made up of various liquid chemicals (the "humours"). These mingled with each other and responded to the external environment. In this sense, people thought of their bodies as being highly differentiated and constantly changing. Bodily difference was a crucial aspect of human physiology.

At the same time, people's bodies were easily shaped by the world around them. Ecological and material environments could have unpredictable effects: old age, disease, injury, childbirth, manual labour, military service, and so on, were likely to leave marks. Once marked, bodies were not easily cured. People would have encountered bodily differences everywhere, and a significant portion of the population would have experienced a degree of impairment at some point in their life. It seems likely that more people in Shakespeare's time would have had physical differences than today, although those differences may have been interpreted in ways unfamiliar to us.

Shakespearean drama is embedded in this unfamiliar model of embodiment and disability. Throughout his works, bodies are altered or transform themselves; fail to line up with what those around them expect; and depend on people and technology to move or behave in certain ways. Some characters are disabled in ways which register immediately with contemporary models of difference. The figure of Richard III has been a 'standard bearer' in this field, a totemic figure of Shakespearean disability. In *King Henry VI* Part 3, Richard Gloucester describes his own body in terms of extreme difference: his arm like a 'withered shrub', legs 'of an unequal size', and the 'mountain on my back'. Richard's difference has been interpreted in a variety of ways by actors in productions of the *Henry VI* and *Richard III* plays.

However, Richard is far from being the only disabled character. There are many others who don't necessarily register with modern disability frameworks, but whom audiences would have understood as disabled - for example, characters said to be old, to have experienced moments of madness, to have lacked intellectual capacity, or to have lacked one of the senses.

At the same time, Shakespeare's presentation of disability should not be interpreted as an ethically straightforward attempt to reflect the variety of human embodiment. Disability was not necessarily presented in ways which disabled people themselves would have chosen. Rather, disabled characters tend to serve a narrative purpose, facilitating plot points and thematic projects. We can understand this with reference to the term 'narrative prosthesis', used by scholars Alison Hobgood and David Houston Wood to describe the ways in which disability is used in literature as an artistic tool for characterisation, plot, and the like. For instance, in *Othello*, Cassio's drunkenness – which is repeatedly referred to as an 'infirmity' – is crucial to the plot, because it sets in motion several key elements of Iago's manipulation and Othello's tragic arc.

This broad model of difference can be used to prompt reconsideration of contemporary assumptions about disability. Reading and watching Shakespeare can challenge the assumption that disability only refers to physical conditions that are visible and limiting. However, non-disabled people, without lived experience, and a general education about disabled people and their history, continue to deem themselves experts in what disability is. In the theatre space, this can mean missing the evidence for disability in the texts, omitting it from productions, or using non-disabled actors (so called "cripping up").

Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida* was one of the Greeks involved in the siege of Troy. The name was a comic gift as Elizabethan pronunciation could make it sound like 'a jakes' (a toilet). Disability is hammered home by others describing him as a monster. In Early Modern usage, this can mean someone not fully human because of bodily difference, but here he is said to be lacking a brain and language.

In both *Henry VI* Part 2 and *Love's Labour's Lost*, characters refer to the time when he was driven 'mad', killing animals while thinking they were his human enemies. In *King Lear*, there is an unflattering comparison of Oswald (Goneril's steward) to Ajax, as a 'fool'.

Antipholus of Ephesus in *The Comedy of Errors* claims that he had taken 'deep scars' and lost much blood in battle. Perhaps the scars were on his chest and normally hidden by clothing. Certainly, they should not always be visible to the other characters and audience, as otherwise it would be too easy to distinguish him from his twin.

The ancient world setting was one in which such marks on the front of the body proved the honour of the scarred person, and their value to the community. In performance, these could be shown to the Duke and the audience when he is asking for justice. His wife complains about him, using terms like 'deformed', 'crooked', and 'stigmatical in making'.

Bardolph in *Henry IV* and *Henry V* is an unfalteringly loyal character with a large diseased nose and a flushed face covered in carbuncles. His condition is repeatedly made fun of by Falstaff and Prince Hal, and this is played as comic relief. Falstaff said, 'I never see thy face but I think upon hell-fire'. Fluellen said 'His face is all bubukles, and whelks, and knobs, and flames o' fire'.

"Bubukles" is a combination of "carbuncles" and "bubos", which implies syphilis, but it is speculated that his condition may also have been rosacea, rhinophyma or alcoholism. Bardolph himself says it is due to "choler", which was attributed to a chemical imbalance, where a choleric temperament denotes anger.

Caliban, from *The Tempest*, is the only character born on the island, which is somewhere outside Europe. Caliban is presented as being ugly. Trinculo and Stephano repeatedly call him a 'monster' (which in Early Modern usage can mean someone not fully human because of bodily difference).

They also suggest he is intellectually inferior to them, when they are by no means the most learned characters in the play. The fact that his mother was the (African) witch Sycorax adds a racist twist to this characterisation of disability as lower status.

Cassandra is in *Troilus and Cressida*, which is set during the Trojan wars. In Greek mythology, she had been cursed with a gift of accurate prophecy, which nobody believes. In the ancient source texts, she is sometimes accorded a 'mad scene'. Here, Troilus calls her 'our mad sister' and refers to 'her brain-sick raptures'.

The stage directions at one point ask for her to be 'raving'. In this scene, she repeats the phrase 'Cry, Trojans, cry' five times in fifteen lines, inviting all to weep for the city's destruction

Coriolanus is a successful fighter in Rome's wars and carries disfiguring but honourable scars as a result. However, he experiences a difficult transition from warrior to politician. Some have read his characterisation as potentially autistic in terms of his inflexibility to circumstances. For example, he refuses to show his scars, as he was expected to do to prove his bravery and suitability for the office of consul.

He is associated with 'choler'. This angry 'passion' was thought to originate from what we might call chemical imbalances in the body, which stopped the person behaving in line with normative expectations.

Hubert de Burgh in King John is described by the title character as “A fellow by the hand of nature mark’d/Quoted and sign’d to do a deed of shame”. This description suggests that physical and moral differences are linked in his mind (and perhaps that of the audience), with disability a mark of villainy. Other characters too are convinced he was the cause of Arthur’s death, but this is shown as a prejudice: Hubert had ultimately chosen not to harm the boy.

The birthmark (or other visible difference) appears to have been an invention by Shakespeare. Perhaps we should be remembering the villainy in kings (those powerful enough to demand harm to others), whether or not any one monarch had disabilities.

Henry IV, in 2 *Henry IV*, has apoplexy, which is seen as a serious condition: “This apoplexy will certainly be his end.” The symptoms are described: “This apoplexy, as I take it, is a kind of lethargy, please your lordship, a kind of sleeping in the blood, a tingling….It hath it original from much grief, from study, and perturbation of the brain. I have read the cause of his effects in Galen; it is a kind of deafness.”

The historical Henry IV is said to have had leprosy, which eventually killed him. Chroniclers framed his disease as a punishment from God for wrongdoing, linking disability with evil. This was not done in the play, however, where it was linked to stress and the sickness of society itself.

Henry V describes his facial difference: “I dare not swear thou lovest me; yet my blood begins to flatter me that thou dost – notwithstanding the poor and untempering effect of my visage….my comfort is, that old age, that ill layer up of beauty, can do no more, spoil upon my face..” He was struck with an arrow on the left side of his nose during a battle, which went six inches deep.

There is modern speculation that there may have been temporal lobe damage, which resulted in personality changes, including seizures, mood changes, paranoia, humourlessness, and increasing religiosity. Physical differences resulting from war wounds were in a distinct category, which were not associated with evil.

Henry VI was ‘smitten with a frenzy and his wit and reason withdrawn’ in 1453 and remained incapable of government for eighteen months. There were further relapses over the remaining eighteen years of his life. In *Henry VI* Part 2, York calls him ‘feeble’, and his Queen ‘slow’. In *Henry VI* Part 3, York calls him ‘simple’, Warwick ‘faint’, Clifford ‘impairing’ and Edward IV ‘no soldier’. Henry himself confesses that ‘They prosper best of all when I am thence.’

Warwick also describes himself as ‘keeper of the king’ – a keeper being the name given to the person appointed to look after someone unable to look after themselves. His uncle Bedford, by contrast, was a totem of victory even seated in a (wheel-)chair.

Julius Caesar has his epilepsy referenced by other characters (although this is not staged). This is attested in ancient sources. Plutarch, for example, frames this as part of an 'overcoming' 'superhuman' narrative, where he is admired by his men for sharing in their lifestyle despite his disability. In the play, however, Cassius mocks the evidence of physical weakness he has witnessed – including getting into difficulties when swimming in the Tiber and having a fever that made him ask for water 'as a sick girl'. Here, disability is presented as proof that he lacks the perfection of a god. Caesar himself, later in the same scene, refers to being deaf in one ear, which seems a Shakespearean invention. It could suggest that Caesar is not the arrogant tyrant of the plotters' imagination.

Katherina is the ‘shrew’ in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Petruchio claims that she was said to ‘limp’ and ‘halt’. Scholars have suggested this impairment could have made her less desirable than her younger sister. In turn, this (and perhaps pain) could affect how she performs her gender. In the ‘Taming’ process, her waspish non-conformity with expected womanly behaviour is attributed to ‘choler’. This angry ‘passion’ was thought to originate from what we might call chemical imbalances in the body, which stopped the person behaving in line with normative expectations. In the play, this leads both her husband and his servant to deny her meat. Traumatised by his treatment of her, she is provoked into “mad” answers by his (gaslighting) insistence that the sun is the moon and that Vincentio is a gentlewoman.

Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a low-status character, the servant of Proteus (one of the two gentlemen of the title). He is represented as a clown, which might also be read as intellectual disability and/or neurodivergence, since Speed refers to him as 'madcap' and he calls himself a 'fool'. He seems to have difficulty understanding the meaning of others, mistaking tide for its homophone tied for example, 'lubber' for 'lover' and 'vanished' for 'banished'.

Those examples might suggest a hearing difference, but he also literally equates standing under something with understanding it. He also seems to have a more complete relationship with his (assistance?) dog Crab than with humans outside his family.

Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* is the daughter of the title character. She experiences disablement following a sexual assault, her attackers cutting off her hands and tongue. This is to prevent her from telling what has happened to her and naming her attackers. It also ensures she suffers longer the loss of her chastity rather than being able to end it all (like Lucretia).

Importantly, disablement does not render her passive, a mere recipient of her family's care – but we do see them misreading her and speaking for her. However, she is able to explain what happened to her, and thus to suggest, and then participate in, the revenge plot which her father borrows from the story in Ovid to which she points.

Macbeth is called a ‘monster’ by Macduff (which in Early Modern usage can mean someone not fully human because of bodily difference).
He is certainly a warrior, a calling which could have exposed him to physical and mental trauma. Veterans can manifest sleep issues and sudden anger and violence, and the play has him both hallucinate and dissociate. On the surface, the prompts for his mental disturbances are conscience and guilt, but his wife insists he often hallucinates and has since his youth. He likewise suggests that it is a ‘strange infirmity which is nothing to those that know me’. The non-survival of the children his wife has breastfed, and his inability to “get kings” may be more than ill luck. Syphilis has been suggested, which can also be associated with paranoia, hallucinations and cognitive impairment.

Margaret appears across four plays. Here we are most interested in *Richard III*, where she is presented as old. It is easy to miss the verbal references to old age and potential disability. In fact, the historical Margaret had died (in her fifties) in 1482 before the death of Edward IV, and she was not in England during the period presented in this play.

Calling her a 'withered hag' suggests both ugliness and the unsettling otherness of a witch. This fits with her cursing other characters in the play. Her accuracy in prediction, however, has made some think of Cassandra, not least because, at first, they believe she is just speaking nonsense, having been maddened by her grief.

Old Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* appears in just one scene. He is not only characterised as blind (and old), but the surname Gobbo means hunchback. He does not recognise his son Launcelot's voice, but perhaps it has broken in the time he has been in Shylock's service (he has now grown a beard). The scenario demands that he successfully navigate the streets alone, rather than being dependent.

Some of the stage business is implied rather than spelt out. Launcelot must kneel for a blessing, and his father must go on to explore his features with his hands to ascertain his identity, discovering the facial hair. His son then perhaps takes his hand to allow him to 'finger' his ribs to confirm that he has been underfed.

Ophelia's mental health declines in response to the events of the play *Hamlet*. First, she has been made by her father, Polonius, to end her relationship with Hamlet. Second, with her brother absent, she has to cope with the trauma of her father being murdered. She is given a couple of 'mad scenes' where she encounters the king and queen. Before the first, a gentleman of the court alerts the queen to the risk that Ophelia, who is viewed sympathetically by her hearers, will say something others will construe dangerously. Despite this warning, her words of grief, seeming to quote love songs, are interpreted as simply being about her father's death. Her anguished state culminates in her drowning, which is understood as being suicide, meaning there are questions about whether she is entitled to a Christian burial.

Othello is the survivor of a lifetime of both physical and mental trauma, including from military service. It is not uncommon for veterans to manifest sudden anger and violence, fixations and delusions of danger and betrayal. Othello is also subject to the additional micro-aggressions of a racist society and, in particular, the racism of his 'honest' ensign Iago. Iago knows him well enough to manipulate and madden him, feeding his paranoia. The script demands that the actor represent a seizure. Iago may not be a very reliable witness, but he insists to Cassio that Othello had experienced a seizure the previous day and that if he is not left alone, he 'breaks out to savage madness'. Doctors have suggested it well describes Temporal Lobe Epilepsy. The headache that his wife wanted to soothe with a handkerchief may also be pertinent.

Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* is regarded as eccentric by other characters and thus a not unsuitable match for Katherina. She suggests there are issues with his appearance, movement, and brain function (‘one half lunatic, a mad-cap ruffian’). When he arrives for the wedding, he is dressed unconventionally and riding a horse said to be suffering multiple ailments (causing the other characters to stare).

He attributes his own behaviour to ‘choler’. This angry ‘passion’ was thought to originate from what we might call chemical imbalances in the body, which stopped the person behaving in line with normative expectations.

Richard III in the plays *Henry VI* and *Richard III* is presented as villainous, and his evildoing is linked in the presentation to his disability (e.g. 'as crooked in… manners as… shape'). There are, however, suggestions that he behaves the way he does because of how others have treated him – rather than because of his bodily difference.

In *Richard III*, he repeatedly invokes St. Paul, who had experienced blindness, but was also imagined to have some form of ongoing physical disability ('a thorn in the flesh'). He is the funniest and most charismatic character on stage, and despite the lazy stereotyping, disabled people have identified with him.

Thersites is a character in *Troilus and Cressida*. He had featured in Homer's telling of the Trojan wars, where he had been represented as both insolent and physically disabled (lame and ugly). He has lower social status than the noble leaders of the Greeks. The characters in the play identify him as a 'deformed and scurrilous Greek'.

Characters such as Achilles, Agamemnon and Ajax use ableist language against him, but he also self-describes as 'a scurvy railing knave: a very filthy rogue'. Achilles seems to suggest he has the permission to speak as his 'fool'. In the first performances, the role is thought to have been played by Robert Armin, who may have been neurodivergent and had a physical disability.

The Duchess of York (Cecily Neville, 1415-1495) in *Richard III* is the mother to Richard, Clarence and Edward. In reference to her 'extreme age', it is easy to miss that verbal references to old age would have cued the audience into potential disability – physical and mental weakening, limb mobility issues, and increased sensory difficulties (with sight and hearing).

She describes herself as having 'feeble limbs' (for which Edward and Clarence had been 'two Crutches'). But she also claims that grief has 'crazed my voice'. She may not read as evil, but she does stigmatise her son Richard's difference.

The Earl of Gloucester in *King Lear* is punished with disablement by having his eyes destroyed and pulled out. Having endured this horror, he acknowledges a 'blindness gain' – 'I stumbled when I saw'. He survives with the assistance of his rejected but honest son Edgar, who is 'on the run' in the disguise of a 'mad' beggar. Edgar acts as his sighted carer and prevents him from committing suicide.

In a later scene, he meets with the title character. The King suggests Gloucester should get glass eyes (which would seem to see). Lear's recent experience, too, had shown him his own conduct, and that of others, in a new light – he had taken 'too little care' of others and not seen which of his daughters truly loved him.

Titus Andronicus is told that it will save the lives of his two sons if his own left hand is cut off. In some productions, this is done by Aaron, and in others, he undertakes the amputation himself. A key relationship in the play is with his daughter Lavini, who also experiences disablement, having lost her hands and tongue. Realising he has been tricked, he begins to speak and behave in ways that others associate with 'madness' brought on by his grief and trauma. In one scene, he realises that he has been talking 'frantically'.

Some productions may suggest that the character is acting out his 'madness' to arouse less suspicion when pursuing vengeance against Aaron and the Goths. Others may suggest his mental state has genuinely been unbalanced.

SUGGESTED READING

Books

Literature and Intellectual Disability in Early Modern England; Folly, Law and Medicine, 1500-1640 by Alice Equestri

Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability by Genevieve Love

Shakespeare and Disability Studies by Sonya Freeman Loftis

Shakespeare and Neurodiversity by Laura Seymour

Unfixable Forms: Disability, Performance and the Early Modern English Theater by Katherine Schaap Williams

Academic papers

Wilson, J. R. (2022). Richard III's Bodies from Medieval England to Modernity: Shakespeare and Disability History

Seymour, L. (2025). Shakespeare and Neurodiversity.

Loftis, S.F. (2022) Shakespeare and Disability Studies

Love, G. (2025) Shakespeare and Disability Theory

Links

Disability and Shakespeare: A Guide for Practitioners and Scholars
The Sundial Link: https://medium.com/the-sundial-acmrs/disability-and-shakespeare-a-guide-for-practitioners-and-scholars-c9ebbfef3c0c

Finding Disability in our Records Shakespeare's Globe (Coming soon)
Link: https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/

Blog: https://wilson.fas.harvard.edu/stigma-in-shakespeare/characters

Images: https://shakespeareillustration.org/


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