

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Genevieve Love, *Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability*

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Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability by Genevieve Love is the first volume in the Arden Studies in Early Modern Drama series edited by Lisa Hopkins and Tanya Pollard. It offers a fresh perspective on the study of disability on the Renaissance stage by arguing for prosthetic disabled characters as figures for theatrical personation. The author focuses on early modern characters with limb difference and prosthetics in four plays: the anonymous *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* (1607) and *A Larum for London* (1602), Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604/1616) and William Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1597).

Through a constant recourse to stringent textual analysis more than to socio-cultural and historical approaches to disability, Love explores how the physically disabled prosthetic character 'mediates a set of related "likeness problems" that structure the theatrical, textual and critical lives' of early modern plays (p. 4). The author approaches disability as a trope for the relationship between actor and role and between early modern plays as performed or in their textual incarnations. By doing so, she participates in the fervent scholarly debate in Early Modern Disability Studies by offering an alternative perspective on physical disability — here no longer viewed as an operational identity category within cultural, social, medical and religious discourses, as most scholars have argued in the last ten years. Unlike them, Love advocates for the 'metarepresentational power of the disabled body in the context of the unique mimetic medium of theatre' (p. 7) and explores the possibilities of figurative understandings of disability.

Love's volume is structured in two parts dealing with the relationships between actor and character and plays in performance and print respectively. The former section, which is concerned with the semiotic and phenomenological dimensions of theatre, focuses on the ways in which early modern plays use the prosthetic body to meditate on the ontological challenge of theatrical personation. Chapter 1 offers a detailed discussion of the anonymous city comedy *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* and of the connection between theatricality and disability exemplified by Cripple — a pattern-drawer in sixteenth-century London. Insofar as he is an actor with an excess leg for a role with a missing limb, Cripple stands out in his 'simultaneous surplus and deficiency' (p. 42) as an epitome of theatrical mimesis whose analogy with prosthetic disabled bodies Love keenly investigates through an insightful reading of the play's lexicon of prosthetic disabled embodiment. In her view, *The Fair Maid* proposes such an analogy in three different ways: there is, first of all, the complex relationship between Cripple and his prosthesis, in which incorporation and separation alternate in a logic that the author describes as 'fused opposition' (p. 44), an uneasy coupling that grounds theatrical personation in the partnership actor-role. Second, Cripple's skilful locomotion, which Love explores through a close reading of his locomotive verbs, exhibits the extent to which 'the actor's body and character's being compete and collaborate in an on-going exchange' (p. 42). Finally, the association between disability and theatrical personation is also conveyed by reflections on the incorporation of actor and role scattered throughout the play. Disability as impersonation, Love contends, is perhaps most vividly displayed in the final scene, when Frank Golding enters the stage donning Cripple's clothes: when Cripple doubles himself and makes prosthetic movement a site of imitation, it is as if he were proving that 'being disabled is *that which is to be imitated*' (p.60).

In Chapter 2, the author moves to the analysis of Stump, a one-legged Flemish veteran soldier, in the anonymous history play *A Larum for London*. Just like Cripple, Stump is pinpointed as a telling incarnation of the theatrical prosthetic body, even though he also embodies the relationship between actor and role by means of other analogies — i.e. the analogy between past and present, play in performance and text in print, England and the Low Countries. Being the 'sole bearer of chivalric values in a corrupt modern culture of consumption and decay' (p. 89), he is a 'figure of both temporal progress and anachronism' (p. 90), who thereby brings the past shock of military violence into his corrupted present. Furthermore, as a hybrid of flesh and wood himself, Stump 'combines a kind of theatrical presence that exceeds the text with textual conventions that exceed theatrical representations' (p. 98). The name 'Stump' — a fourteenth-

century English word probably deriving from Dutch — ultimately evokes a connection between the domestic and the foreign. Besides, rather than being staged as the site of imitation, Stump's disabled body is compared with that of a fat burgher of Antwerp, who antithetically embodies Dutch excess through a fake belly. Stump's amputation clashes with the fat burgher's superfluity: they serve as representatives of two opposite logics that Love denominates 'the paunch-logic of augmentation' and 'the stump-logic of substitution', whereby 'the paunch [metonymically] stands for the belly with which it is associated but not identical' and 'the stump [metaphorically] stands for [...] the leg that is not there' (p. 78).

In the second half of the volume, Love brings into focus the ways in which the disabled prosthetic body represented on stage exits that very stage, 'enters dramatic paratexts and bibliographical discourse' (p. 4) and is accordingly deployed to evoke 'the losses incurred in illicit printings of plays, or simply in the move from page to stage' (p. 23). Love helpfully reminds readers how playwrights and critics have made recourse since the seventeenth century to the metaphor of a play 'in troubled transit among media as deformed, "lame", as a "cripple"' (p. 23) and argues that the figure of disability often marks 'a textual anticipation of the play's bibliographical and critical futures' (p. 155). Chapter 3 engages with the bibliographical tradition of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, especially as regards the editorial challenges it poses — i.e. its existence in two significantly different early printed versions, a shorter A-text (1604) and a longer B-text (1616), competing for authority. As Love remarks, early modern bibliographical discourse would often characterize published versions of performed plays as vulnerable in relation to their 'originals'. More than with references to vulnerability as such, *Doctor Faustus*'s Renaissance and modern scholarship seems to be scattered with 'an enduring bibliographical lexicon of diagnosis, mutilation, disfigurement, rehabilitation' (p. 108); here, the trope of the 'text-in-problematic-transmission as a disfigured or deformed body' (p. 105) is recurrent. Love delves into the lexicon of the anomalous body in *Faustus*'s bibliographical tradition in order to show the play's concern with dynamics of truncation and augmentation. The figure of prosthetic disability thus rhetorically links Marlowe's play — whose B-text features two false dismemberments and a real one, as well as the apparent regeneration of Faustus's amputated leg — to its critical fortune. Here, the play's key concern with 'the theatrical body's oscillation between prosthetic enlargement and corporeal deletion' (p. 127) is appropriated and redeployed to mark *Doctor Faustus*'s B-text as an amputated version of the A-text. Love contends that both Faustus and the actor playing Faustus are empowered by these dynamics of diminishment and amplification. Moreover, she finds evidence for the

‘perverse allure of the theatrical body’ (p. 126) in textual approaches based on the enduring metaphor of the printed text as supposedly corrupt.

The complex printing history of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* — published in eight early versions between 1597 and 1634 — is the subject of the last chapter of the book, as well as the key framework of the degree of difference haunting both the play and its critical tradition. Love makes a convincing case for the constant oscillation between sameness and difference as linking ‘the bibliographical state of *Richard III*, the physical status of Richard III in text and performance, and the form of the historical Richard III’s bones’ (p. 130); the author also argues that the degree of difference between the early texts of *Richard III*, between Shakespeare’s Richard and the Richard portrayed in Thomas More’s and Edward Hall’s accounts, between Richard’s body and other bodies (or other versions of his own) in the play, and between competing interpretations of X-Rays of his presumptive spinal remains recently discovered in Leicester is only a matter of perspective and movement. Love’s special focus on Richard’s movement, in contrast with the usual critical emphasis on his misshapen body, actually stands out as the most innovative contribution to scholarly discussion of the deformity of Shakespeare’s Richard III. Starting from a close examination of the opening soliloquy of the play, the author investigates Richard’s unusual ways of moving and, while pointing to the fact that in *Richard III* (unlike *Henry VI – Part III*) Richard’s body is never described, she unveils how ‘he is on the move, but shifting between starting and stopping, horizontal and vertical, driven and directionless’ (p. 147). As Love remarks in her ‘Afterword’, like Richard ‘the theatrical body bustles: it is directionless, ineffectual, in that its diegetic actions may not have corresponding real-world effects; at the same time, it is powerfully committed to a particular direction, the mimetic task of communicating presence to playgoers’ (p. 154).

Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability is an intellectually engaging volume, a thorough and coherent study, written in a dense prose and supported by accurate endnotes as well as by a comprehensive, updated bibliography. In order to support her claims — even those that might sound slightly far-fetched — the author relies upon keen critical insights stringently based on textual evidence. Moreover, she manages to explore the multifarious implications of her grounding assumption in ways that readers will not only find fascinating but also persuasive; she does so also by dint of her ability to guide them step by step, making both her intent and her methodology clear from the outset. Such clarity, however, seems somewhat impaired by too many explanations and intertextual cross-references that often create a sense of redundancy. A wider and more

motivated selection of case studies would also have helped to support the force of Love's claims. No matter how telling, the specific, heterogenous and spare figures of Cripple, Stump, Doctor Faustus and Richard III do not seem to have been selected for special reasons since nothing is said in this regard. In a brief endnote we are only made privy to the reason for solely male prosthetic characters: the only disabled female roles available in the repertoire of early modern English plays are not provided with prosthesis and only record 'imitated or actual intellectual disability, blindness and deafness' (p. 157). In her 'Afterword', the author helpfully pulls together the main points of her dense and compelling study of these four disabled characters, but the volume suffers from the absence of a proper conclusion that might have accomplished the task of paving the way for future discussions on and further evolutions of the issues Love raises.

Despite these remarks, this book will certainly stimulate discussion among Early Modern Disability scholars, since the author's interpretation of disability on the Renaissance stage purposefully challenges recent scholarship. As a matter of fact, and as illustrated in the volume's comprehensive overview of the main lines of research since the early 2000s, most of the critics in the last two decades have deemed metaphorical readings of literary and theatrical outcomes of early modern disabled bodies to be limited and unsatisfactory. Yet, it is precisely this figurative approach that Love recasts as a key tool for the understanding of both theatricality *and* disability in early modern English culture. *Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability* offers an innovative perspective that adds a new dimension to our reading of disability on the early modern stage and will prove relevant for Disability Studies, Drama Studies and Textual Studies as regards early modern literature, theatre and culture. Besides charting unexplored aspects of the plays it investigates, this volume has the merit of enhancing the full potential of metaphorical approaches to dramatic prosthetic characters just as it shows that disability as a trope *can* be deployed as a fruitful critical tool seeking new and engaging understandings of both minor and major early modern plays.