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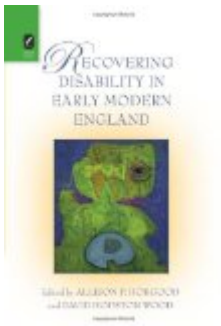

Allison P. Hobgood, David Houston Wood, eds.. *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013. 240 pp. $52.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8142-1215-8.

Reviewed by Simon Jarrett

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Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Any addition to the sparse body of work on disability in the early modern period is welcome, and in ***Recovering Disability in Early Modern England***, Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood have brought together an intriguing and stimulating collection of essays ranging across subjects as diverse as dwarf aesthetics, disability humor, and even the impact of a restaging of ***Richard III*** in the post-Communist Czech Republic. Meaningful and substantial sources are always a problem for any early modernist seeking to unearth the conceptual, cultural, and discursive assumptions that formed meanings for disability in this period. This collection draws primarily on literary sources from prose and poetic narratives and staged drama. Hobgood and Wood choose as their underlying conceptual theme Rosemary Garland-Thompson's idea of "the stare," how those who see themselves as normative grapple with the concept of the nonnormative body by staring, often with surprise, at people formed or behaving in an unfamiliar way. Literary and other cultural productions are of course an interesting vehicle through which to examine this idea of the stare, and the returned gaze that it invites. Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell's concept of the "narrative prosthesis," where deformity is invariably used as metaphor to symbolize disharmony, unbalance, and internal dysfunction, thereby providing a narrative crutch to the plot as it limps to its conclusion, provides a useful underpinning for many of the contributions. There are also interesting attempts to delve beyond this one-dimensional metaphorical straitjacket, and to examine disability ***as*** disability in a range of cultural depictions.

A problem with literary sources is that they tend to tell us how particular members of an elite read disability and used it for a particular purpose. These contributions are at their strongest when they mix literary narratives with other cultural sources and examine the interplay between these elite cultural representations and wider discursive and popular characterizations. Simone Chess's essay "Performing Blindness: Representing Disability in Early Modern Popular Performance and Print" offers an absorbing analysis of

the meanings and perceived status of blindness as a real and embodied cultural experience as well as a theatrical artefact. She combines a reading of *Henry VI* (part 2) and other drama with medico-scientific explanations and an analysis of the woodcuts that accompanied the ballad of the *Blind Beggar's Daughter of Bednal-Green*, to consider how real people might have negotiated the loss of sight in the early modern period. David Turner's excellent examination of disability-related humor in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century joke books ("Disability Humor and the Meanings of Impairment in Early Modern England") provides a long overdue corrective to received characterizations of all disability humor at this time as, for example, "an ideology of form which necessarily dismissed the deformed or the disabled as foreign, transgressive, ugly and inherently worthy of contempt."[1] Turner gives jokes a more subtle reading, arguing that despite the evident early modern delight, to modern ears, in cruelty and a propensity to mock the ludicrous, comic narratives invoked disability in a variety of contexts and challenged conventional wisdom about bodily norm. He sees jest books as participants in a debate about different meanings of disability rather than as the one-dimensional vehicles of objectification usually seen by modern eyes.

Nancy J. Hirschmann in "Freedom and (Dis)ability in Early Modern Political Thought" offers a lucid examination of the relation of notions of freedom to conceptualizations of disability in the thought of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. For Hobbes, in the mid-seventeenth century, deliberation and will trumped inherent ability, and disabled people were free in the sense that they could do that which was within the range of what they intended or chose to do. They would not choose to do what their impairment made them unable to do. Less than half a century later, Locke was defining disability impairment in a way more recognizable to modern sensibilities, where the impairment restricted the freedom of the individual to enact their will. However, the absence of sources can lead to dangerous speculation about what might have happened in this period in the lived experience of individuals with disabilities. In her otherwise convincing analysis, Hirschmann suggests that the absence of substantial numbers of disabled people from the historical record indicates that they formed a smaller part of the population than is the case today, when "contemporary society with its pollution, processed food and stress, has likely produced many more disabilities and disabling diseases" (p. 169). If they could speak to us, I feel this view would not be shared by the hunched early modern nail makers of the Midlands, who gave the region the nickname of "Humpshire," or by those poisoned and disabled in the lead workshops, disabled by respiratory diseases in polluted London and stunted and deformed by poor and inadequate diet.

Similarly, I was intrigued but not convinced by Mardy Phillipian's speculation in "The Book of Common Prayer, Theory of Mind, and Autism in Early Modern England" that the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer created a mode of social access and acceptance for those with atypical theory of mind, who would be characterized as persons on the autistic spectrum today. His thesis is that the scripts and teaching of the new prayer book coupled with the daily rituals of the reformed church gave the atypically minded a sense of understanding and self-identification which led to acceptance within the congregation and therefore the community. He compares the function and impact of the prayer book to the social scripts and stories used to develop and teach theory of mind today. To accept this theory involves accepting its underlying assumptions that there was a problematization of cognitive atypicality in the period similar to our own today, and that those characterized as such could process the information presented in the prayer book, apply it to how they lived their lives, and interpret it in the same way as the normative majority in the congregation. Each of these propositions requires some commitment. C. F.

Goodey has written elsewhere of the exclusionary role of the catechism in the new religion as it created a requirement for literacy, reason, and a human personality type that could drive toward perfection, in opposition to the stultifying (but inclusive) mass participation of Catholicism.[2] It would be interesting to see Phillipian's inclusive theory engage with Goodey's exclusionary hypothesis.

Edmund Spenser's truly epic allegorical poem from the 1590s, ***Faerie Queene***, is of great fascination to the disability historian with its highly symbolic dwarves; maimed knights; and blind, dumb, and deaf maidens. Sara Van Den Berg's examination, in "Dwarf Aesthetics in Spenser's ***Faerie Queene*** and the Early Modern Court," of the heavily codified and largely nonspeaking cohort of Spenser's dwarves and their physical, psychological, and aesthetic interweaving with other characters and even the artist himself is a fine analysis. Rachel E. Hile intriguingly dissects Spenser's allegorical linking of stigmatizing bodily difference with moral meanings in "Disabling Allegories in Edmund Spenser's ***Faerie Queene***." Both are important contributions to a disability reading of a seminal early modern work whose underlying disability thematics have not been stared at nearly enough. In the late seventeenth century, Mrs. Aphra Behn brought a new coolly satirical and ironic eye to the conflation of gender and impairment. In "Maternal Culpability in Fetal Defects: Aphra Behn's Satiric Interrogations of Medical Models," Emily Bowles explores the influence of contemporary midwifery texts on Behn's work and her subversion of the medical trope that a woman's morality, experience, and behavior influenced fetal defects. This essay does full justice to a writer who gazed at disability with an insightful eye. The theme of performance is explored in two other contributions. Lauren Coker ("'There is no suff'ring due': Metatheatricality and Disability Drag in Volpone") explores the "disability drag" theme of Ben Jonson's ***Volpone*** (1606) and its relation to early modern concerns about "performance" (in a deceptive way) of disability. Lindsey Row-Heyveld's "Antic Dispositions: Mental and Intellectual Disabilities in Early Modern Revenge Tragedy" argues that the surface invisibility of madness drove the plot lines of revenge tragedies "obsessed with uncovering the unseen" (p. 77).

The most surprising contribution, and all the more gratifying for that, is Marcela Kostihova's account of a staging of ***Richard III*** in post-Velvet Revolution Czech Republic, "Richard Recast: Renaissance Disability in a Postcommunist Culture." A well-known Czech actor, who had become paralyzed through a car accident while engaged in dissident activities against the former Communist regime, played Richard. The combination of a stigmatizing Communist-era view of disability, an accidentally disabled hero actor, and the early modern period's greatest stage villain unleashed a fascinating whirlpool of conflicting views and reactions. From Kostihova's essay we see that early modern ideas about disability are not only a matter for academic theoretical discourse, but also living tropes that subtly infuse modern thinking. This absorbing and enjoyable collection is an important contribution to our understanding of early modern thought on disability.

Notes

[1]. Roger Lund, "Laughing at Cripples: Ridicule, Deformity and the Argument from Design," ***Eighteenth Century Studies*** 39, no. 1 (2005): 111. See also Simon Dickie, "Hilarity and Pitilessness in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: English Jestbook Humour," ***Eighteenth Century Studies*** 37, no. 1 (2003), which argues from a similar perspective.

[2]. C. F. Goodey, ***A History of Intelligence and Intellectual Disability: The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe*** (Ashgate: Farnham, 2011), 151-178.

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