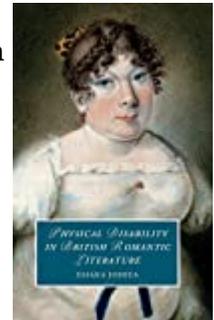


**Essaka Joshua.** *Physical Disability in British Romantic Literature.* Cambridge Studies in Romanticism Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. x + 302 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-79917-1.



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**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Essaka Joshua's new book is a work of two parts. Part of the Cambridge Studies in Romanticism series, Joshua's monograph is firmly located in the literary criticism tradition. Throughout, she draws on disability theory to provide new interpretations of important eighteenth-century texts, ranging from the political and social manifestos of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) and William Godwin (1756-1836) to novels by Frances Burney (1752-1840) and Mary Shelley (1797-1851). Along the way, she teases out some of the complexities of contemporary ideas of "deformity" and the "picturesque," locating her analysis in the broader context of Romantic thought. Throughout, Joshua balances her reexamination of these texts with detailed critiques of earlier literary criticism, particularly those whose reading of physical impairment and disability may be seen as anachronistic or ableist.

The second theme running throughout the book is one that has wider implications, and whose significance should be felt beyond the field of Romantic literary studies. Joshua convincingly

argues that many early modern histories of disability are inherently flawed, using anachronistic concepts and terms to analyze what Joshua describes as a "pre-disability era." Instead, Joshua tries to explore bodily impairment using the terms that had meaning in the eighteenth century, namely, "deformity," "weakness," and "monstrosity," as well as related concepts like "capacity" and theories of the picturesque. A clear and robustly argued introduction sets the reader up for her nuanced discussions of these various terms throughout the book, with the different threads brought together in a confident conclusion.

One of the challenges facing Joshua in this book is the balance between the two elements. As she herself writes in the introduction, her work is "a revisionist approach to Romantic studies, [and] it is just as much a rethinking of disability studies' approach to history" (p. 5). While chapters 1 to 6, which offer detailed case studies of a range of texts, might be of more interest to literary critics, the introduction, conclusion, and an excellent appendix speak more generally to the disability his-

torian. In the appendix, Joshua explores dictionary definitions of “disability” and “deformity,” noting that “no critical work has been done on eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century dictionary definitions of ‘disability’ and other relevant terms” (p. 185). What follows is a thoroughly fascinating discussion of the different meanings and uses of the word “disability,” as well as a critical analysis of the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s claims about usage. I hope that Joshua will be inspired to take this research further. Not only does her work in this section challenge how we analyze and identify “disability,” but she also shows that assumptions about binaries are often wrong. The appendix demonstrates that words we consider to be opposites (for example, able and disable, normalcy and disability) often come into being hundreds of years apart. This section also includes an illuminating discussion about wounded soldiers, care for veterans, and the use of the word “disabled” (particularly relevant for an earlier discussion about William Wordsworth’s “Discharged Soldier” [1798]). I only wish that this fascinating and important section was longer, and I suggest reading it *before* chapters 1-6; many of the ideas Joshua addresses in the main text are made explicit here.

At the heart of Joshua’s thesis is her argument that the term “disability” is not helpful in exploring attitudes toward, and experiences of, bodily impairment or difference in the Romantic period (and presumably earlier too). Drawing on terminology used in Romantic studies, she refers to the eighteenth century (and implicitly earlier) as a “pre-disability era.” She defines this as a time before the word “disability” was used to refer to the *causes* of inability rather than the “inability” itself. Joshua also points out that histories of disability are actually accounts of “specific bodily or mental configurations that are now clustered under the general category of disability” (p. 1). As a result, Joshua demands that we untangle our modern meanings of “disability” as a descriptor and as a term of analysis. Instead, she proposes that we

are led by contemporary terms and, moreover, that we are sensitive to how the implications of those terms—like “capacity” and “deformity”—change depending on social context. As Joshua neatly puts it, “a disability studies approach that does not use the term ‘disability’ allows us to recover pre-disability concepts” (p. 3).

So, what are some of these words and concepts? Well, Joshua provides a nuanced reading of a range of texts, examining the terms used to describe bodily difference, “abnormality” and “deformity.” She takes a range of different works as case studies to analyze different ideas and words. She draws on the writings of the British radical William Godwin to explore the concept of “capacity.” Using his most famous work of political philosophy, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), as a starting point, Joshua examines how Godwin used “capacity” as a measure of social value. Putting Godwin in his broader intellectual context, it becomes clear that for Godwin, “capacity” is closely related to physical and mental ability. Social value—which is determined by the ability to contribute to the “general good”—appears, therefore, to be a function of “able-bodiedness and able-mindedness.” Those with physical and cognitive “incapacities” are apparently excluded. Joshua stresses that this ableism is not a result of a belief in a “norm” but rather the product of Godwin’s vision of the “general good”: a more nebulous, but no less powerful, concept.

Joshua then turns to Godwin’s wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, to explore how Wollstonecraft understood capacity as existing in three senses: social, intellectual, and physical. In Wollstonecraft’s writings—most notably her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)—women deserved equality because of their potential capacities. Again, corporeal and cognitive ability underpins Wollstonecraft’s vision of an equitable future. Academics have already drawn on disability studies to analyze Wollstonecraft’s work. Douglas C. Baynton, for example, has demonstrated that

nineteenth-century suffragettes used ideas of disability to argue *for* emancipation (arguing that since women were not disabled, they deserved the vote, and further, that women were “disabled” by society).[1] Joshua addresses this analysis and complicates it by exploring Wollstonecraft’s vision of weakness and its apparent opposite, vigor. As Joshua argues for Wollstonecraft, “weakness [w]as a category of exclusion before disability emerged as a concept” (p. 95).

The next interesting case study is Frances Burney’s novel *Camilla* (1796). While Burney’s novels are well known for exploring female identities, Joshua focuses on Burney’s depiction of the physical “deformity” of one of the characters, Eugenia, in *Camilla*. Eugenia was dropped by her uncle in childhood and acquired a spinal injury, leading to a limp and restricted growth. She also caught smallpox, and her face bore the scars of her illness. As a result, Eugenia was routinely dismissed, pitied, and mocked for her “deformities.” Burney was acutely aware of the difference between a bodily condition and the social construction of disability; in the novel it is only when Eugenia grows up that she becomes aware of the social significance of her “deformity.” Joshua argues that this illustrates an early sense of the “social model” of disability and sets it in the context of functional and aesthetic meanings of disability. Her analysis here is part of a larger discussion of the meaning of “deformity,” drawing on theories of the picturesque to think about ideas of “deformity,” ugliness, and their opposites.

The influence of deformity as a term of analysis continues into the last chapter when Joshua explores Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818). Joshua points out that, whereas deformity is largely a matter of aesthetics, “monstrosity” is a “physiological and mythological” category. However, both are used in contemporary and critical discussions about *Frankenstein* and in the elision of moral virtues and physical features. While Joshua addresses this, she focuses on “transform-

ative vision,” drawing on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s work on “staring at the other” to argue that critics have ignored the importance of sight in *Frankenstein* (p. 155).[2] Joshua asks whether “blindness” removes prejudice, addresses the creature’s search for a sympathetic viewer, and highlights “Shelley’s interest in how looking constructs monstrosity/deformity” (p. 178).

Joshua uses writing about disability and disability theory to bring a new perspective to her analysis of these texts. As a result, this is an important contribution to literary criticism of the Romantic era. There is a larger historical significance too in her careful reading of the nuance of language and the evolution of terminology we use in our discussions of disability history.

#### Notes

[1]. Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Laura Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 33-57.

[2]. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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