Whatever resistance remains to the application of disability studies theories to Shakespeare scholarship ought by now to be abandoned. Objections based on the claim of anachronism—that early modern people did not view disability as we do—are somewhat faded, given that Shakespeare's work continues to be performed, and it remains a dynamic cultural force that evolves to reflect the lived experience of modern people with diverse bodies and minds. In *Shakespeare and Disability Studies*, Sonya Freeman Loftis methodically champions disability studies' application to Shakespeare. Disability theory argues for making Shakespeare, particularly in performance, accessible and inclusive, not merely for audience members, but for participants. This book exceeds expectations. I am so impressed that I recommend *Shakespeare and Disability Studies* to any literature classes including disability studies.

The introduction elucidates why disability studies theories belong in Shakespeare scholarship and performance. On the one hand, Shakespeare's works are reputed to portray the range of human experience and articulate what it means to be human, and these cultural artifacts have an inherently ennobling and enriching effect. On the other, this quality has a distinctly ignoble effect when those already familiar with Shakespeare are tempted to embark on a patronizing mission to bring the Bard to those who sit in darkness. Very often, it is people with disabilities who experience the inherent discrimination in such views: first, that disability makes them less human, or more kindly, barred from universal human experiences, and second, that disability's “deficiencies” compound the problem of access; perhaps one who is deaf or blind may still be able to enjoy Shakespeare's plays, but what about the neurodivergent? Is it possible to create access for those disabilities? In answer, Loftis shows how Shakespeareans “are in a natural position to consider disability access ... [as they] are already trained to think about access to Shakespeare's work in terms of social class, cultural relatability, and educational level” (p. 12). Here lies the strength of this slender book: Loftis succinctly identifies the struggles the disability community encounters in the presence of this cultural giant, but just as deftly describes the solutions already evolving with the contributions of those in the disability community.

Current disability theory in literature reaches beyond analyzing a single disabled character, so a chapter dedicated to Richard III initially seems outdated. However, like Tiny Tim, Richard III is an emblematic figure in disability studies: conversa-
tions about Richard encapsulate how literature and history too readily deny the validity of disability as a theoretical perspective and lived experience. The 2014 documentary Richard III: The New Evidence and the BBC’s 2016 series The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses reflect doubts about the truth of Richard’s impairment in a way that mirrors cultural suspicions about disability generally; literature and history too readily call on disability to “prove” itself. Shakespeare’s villainous depiction of Richard remains ubiquitous, even though recent historians have sought to rescue him from this negative characterization by claiming he was neither a villain nor disabled. The 2012 discovery of Richard’s remains provided irrefutable evidence of Richard’s spinal deformity and yet the medio-scientific assessment in the 2014 documentary strives to “prove” that Richard was both physically impaired and capable of what the historical record already says he did: fight bravely and rule effectively. This documentary seems to champion the disabled subject’s position in history, but the very fact of having to “prove” that a disabled man was a successful king represents the ways in which disability, in fact and fiction, is held in suspicion. Shakespeare studies have historically been equally misguided in what disability signifies in a character like Richard III, but recent productions are exploring the nuances of disability, as can be seen with Loftis’s analysis of The Hollow Crown, which places Richard’s physical difference in the spotlight.

I did not initially see beyond how the series put Richard’s disabled body on display, but Loftis recognized what I could not, which is how the series reflects a keener awareness of Richard’s social experience of disability shaping his character rather than essentializing it around a physical impairment. The chapter’s depth makes its case for its tight focus. The documentary and series offer accessible presentations of Richard as a historical and fictional figure, and her assessments track how cultural perceptions of disability have evolved, even if culture remains unsettled about what disability means.

The next chapters champion disability access and inclusion in Shakespeare performances by acknowledging that the difficulty of Shakespeare’s texts for all audiences has long established access as a primary concern. Loftis identifies two performance venues—Shakespeare’s Globe and the Royal Shakespeare Company in the United Kingdom and the Oregon Shakespeare Company in the United States—whose desire for universal access sets the mark for theaters desiring to expand the audience. Universal access means more than accommodating physical spaces for wheelchairs or providing large-print programs; it may include sign-language interpretation, open captioning, audio descriptions, or, more comprehensively, providing relaxed or sensory-friendly performances. Changes in lighting and sound design, and limiting ticket sales to reduce audience size, serve a sensory-sensitive audience that may further benefit from “chilled-out” performances that alter the social expectations of stillness and silence from audience members. Allowing movement and vocalizations liberates far more people than those who identify as neurodivergent or disabled because older attendees and those with small children benefit as well. Furthermore, the cast and crew respond positively to these events, which generate an atmosphere that inspires a sense of play and possibility, rather than a more traditional presentation of Shakespeare’s work. And here Loftis makes a profound claim: while we have grown accustomed to seeing disability for its losses and limitations, universal design’s goals go beyond access for audiences and may expand artistic possibilities for the production as the considerations for disability access invite creative solutions and opportunities.

The third and fourth chapters explore the inclusion of people with disabilities in performing Shakespeare and, happily, these chapters provide more positive examples than otherwise. Chapter 3,
“Play for All: Shakespeare Therapy and The Concept of Inclusion,” will inform readers who are unfamiliar with disability studies on three crucial concepts. The first is a clear differentiation between medical and social models of disability. The second, illustrating the use of the medical model, reveals the danger of seeking to rescue people with disabilities from their condition, which is perceived as not just different, but detrimental. Shakespeare texts frequently take part in missions to “enrich” the minds of the ignorant because they occupy the high-water mark of literary achievement, giving it the necessary clout for reaching the young, uncultured, or, as Loftis emphasizes, neurodivergent. As in all crusades, good intentions crumble under a colonizing mission, with all the problematic power dynamics between the crusaders bringing culture to the Calibans, or those who must be humanized by exposure to the Bard. The book’s example concerns the Hunter Heartbeat Method, a program offered to children on the autistic spectrum, who are paired with Shakespearean actors who teach these children how to make eye contact and to “play.” This use of Shakespeare as therapy assumes that when these children mask the behaviors common to children on the spectrum, they are improved through the intervention of the neurotypical and the cultural force that is Shakespeare. Fortunately, Loftis identifies another therapeutic program that inverts such power dynamics: DE-CRUIT encourages military veterans with PTSD to rewrite speeches from Shakespeare that resonate with their own experience of war traumas, illustrating the third concept from disability studies, which is that when people with disabilities own their experiences, only then does effective inclusion take place. The fourth chapter analyzes Still Dreaming (2014), a documentary about a performance of A Midsummer Night’s Dream at an assisted living facility. Here the colonizing agenda is again undone. The directors are two young, able-bodied, and neurotypical men who struggle to direct a cast living with a range of age-related disabilities. The performance succeeds not because disability is “overcome”, but rather when the cast uses their experiences of impairment in the creative process.

Loftis’s argument unfolds methodically, beginning with establishing the benefits of viewing Shakespeare and disability studies through a clear delineation of the latter’s theories; identifying resistance to disability’s presence in history and art; defining the challenges of access and the potential for creative expansion with the universal access mindset; and thoroughly investigating the practices of inclusion and which of them fulfill the goals of access by promoting the aesthetic potential of the experience of disability. The subjects of her analysis are timely and reflect the many ways that disability consciousness is already present in television and film. The clarity of Loftis’s argument is matched by the clarity of her prose, making this book an ideal choice for the university classroom. Loftis champions disability studies in Shakespeare for the present—for the students, scholars, and audiences with disabilities who engage with Shakespeare’s texts and performances, and for their lived experiences.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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