# **Shakespeare’s Disabled, Disabled Shakespeare**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to offer an historical reading of the character Richard/Gloucester in the plays *Richard III* and *Henry VI part* *two* and *three*, with particular focus upon Shakespeare’s presentation of Disability. It suggests that, regulated through the theatrical and literary tools of new historicism and Brecht’s historicisation, Shakespeare’s work is able to demonstrate the process of achieving social justice in relation to Disability, by illuminating the significance of the differences between past and present. The overarching provocation for practice is that by illuminating the historical context that underpins the plays, participants are better placed to see the content of things- its appropriateness and the success or failure of it- so that social justice can be considered.

## **Introduction**

Shakespeare’s subtle exploration of moral issues, analysis of human and social problems, and his attempt to grapple with ‘timeless’ and ‘universal’ themes have for many years made his plays appear an ideal vehicle for artists concerned with raising public and political consciousness, and promoting social justice amongst marginalised communities. Over four hundred years after his death, Shakespeare’s plays still appeal to a wide range of projects concerned with social justice due to their opportunities to promote critical and collaborative reflection.

Disabled theatre is an integrative form of theatre, which identifies with opportunities for social justice by ‘pursuing an activist perspective in dismantling stereotypes, challenging stigma, and re-imagining Disability as a valued human condition’ (Johnston, 2012, p.43). It is theatre that:

‘ensures that Disabled people are at the centre of the creative process, allowing Disability to influence that process. More precisely, it can be defined as theatre which involves a majority of Disabled people, explores a Disability aesthetic and mirrors in some way the lives of Disabled people’ (Morrison, 1992).

There are a range of Disabled theatre projects that use Shakespeare in order to explore some level of social justice.[[1]](#footnote-1) Through various levels of active and integrative participation, the results are suggested to be transformative for those involved (Cox, 1992: Linklater, 1993: Hughes, 1993: Cox & Thielgaard, 1994: Jacobs, 2008, Walsh: 2012).

Often the justification behind selecting Shakespeare’s plays as a tool to aid social justice is founded in the promotion of a universalising discourse. This discourse can afford an ‘unreflective affirmation’ of a range of ideals promoted through the engagement with Shakespeare’s plays. The implication is that complex and complicated profiles of characters, found in Shakespeare’s plays, can be promoted and explored by potentially vulnerable communities of people as a ‘blue-print’ for learning about social justice. The ideals promoted can often be assumptive and taken-for-granted beliefs about the work that often override the consideration of the political and cultural values embedded in Shakespeare’s own theatre.

As a method of subverting the universalisation of Shakespeare’s plays, the article suggests the use of new historicism and Brecht’s historicisation. For demonstrative purposes it applies an historical reading to the character of Richard/Gloucester in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *Henry VI part two* and *three* (to alleviate confusion the character is simply referenced as Richard throughout). This method aims to demonstrate how, through new historicism and Brecht’s historicisation, participants are able to find relevant and appropriate opportunities to consider social justice.

The article recommends that a critical and historical reading of Shakespeare’s plays remains important to the practice of considering social justice and affords three main outcomes. It: 1) offers the participants a safe distance when exploring opportunities for social justice, 2) subverts the universalising discourse to avoid assumptive and taken-for-granted beliefs about Shakespeare’s work, 3) challenges the concept of universal truth and demonstrates where differences and not similarities exist.

Overall, this article argues that for any social justice to be understood in Shakespeare’s plays, there must be an understanding of what may have influenced Shakespeare’s own understanding and presentation of Disability. A Renaissance reading of Shakespeare’s Richard is offered in order to more carefully interrogate the use(s) of Shakespeare’s plays in tackling social justice from the perspective of Disability.

## **Methodology: New Historicism and Brecht’s Historicisation**

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is an important figure in understanding why one would benefit from reading Shakespeare’s works historically. His links to social justice are also acknowledged. Brecht recommends the technique of historicisation which is a device used to interpret the play as a product of historical development. It acknowledges that different points in history produce different values, behaviours and opinions. Brecht argues that because present day differs (often substantially) from earlier periods there is a necessity to recognise the work in its original context.

It is in relation to Brecht’s concept of verfremdungseffekt that the historical reading of Shakespeare’s work becomes coherent.[[2]](#footnote-2) The distancing effect offers attempts to create a cognitive change where the granted is no longer taken-for-granted. By distancing oneself from the issues of today, and reading them through the lessons of yesterday the mind is concentrated on opportunities for social change. According to Brecht (in Brecht & Willett, 1992, p.190), ‘[a] representation that [estranges] is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar’. For Brecht (in Brecht & Willett, 1992, p.190) verfremdungseffekt used alongside historicisation ‘keeps impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too’. By stressing the impermanence of social conditions, Brecht explains that change can happen and social justice can be achieved. Brecht explains that conditions are created by man and they can be changed by man, through learning and changing things based on looking back to similar things that have happened in history. Once conditions are no longer seen as universal or permanent, but as changeable, the audiences' will say, (in Brecht's words), ‘[t]his person's suffering shocks me, because there might be a way out for him’ (Martin & Bial, 2000, p. 26).

Complimentary of Brecht’s theatrical vision for Shakespeare’s work, is the literary work of new historicists who are similarily concerned with reading Shakespeare’s work as a product of history. New historicists aim to understand Shakespeare’s work through the context of its own time, comparing this to how the plays have been used in English culture since the seventeenth century. Greenblatt (2000) who co-founded new historicism, offers a method of understanding literature by examining elements in history that ‘previous critics have ignored or deemed irrelevant’ (Bernstein, 1991). New historicists are concerned with exploring opportunities to subvert and contain current understanding of early modern texts through a universalising of the work, allowing for an interpretaion of Shakespeare’s plays that construct closer relationships between play text and history.

It is important to establish that the article is not suggesting that Brecht’s recommendation of historicisation should be captured in its entirety. That the theories of new historicists are the only ones through which to interpret Shakespeare’s plays. That modernisations of the work are not relevant, or that those using Shakespeare’s works need to present an historically dogmatic version of the plays. Instead it suggests that an historical *understanding* of Shakespeare’s plays is important in order to explore more thoroughly the considerations of social jusice captured within Shakespeare’s work ‘allowing the audience to view the events critically, [and to] not merely accept them’ (Rossi, 1991, p.57).

It is acknowledged that an immediate limitation of an historical reading can be identified in Knights’ (1979, pp.226-227) warnings that:

‘the attraction of the historical or reconstructive procedure is of course that it seems to approach something like a guaranteed meaning – *the* meaning in the minds of an ideal audience contemporary with the plays- and thereby to offer an escape from uncertainty of merely personal interpretation and criticism’.

However, what is not being suggested here is that we can determine for a fact how the plays were received or intended to be received. Instead, it is recommended that the value of historical scholarship in the study of literature is founded in accepting that different meanings for different generations do exist. That generally audiences have different histories and various baggage that may affect their readings of a play. All audience members do not respond the same way to a piece of theatre and this is recognised throughout the article and acknowledged when undertaking an historical reading of Shakespeare’s work.

## **A Renaissance reading of Shakespeare and Disability (through the plays *Richard III* and *Henry VI Part Two* and *Three*)**

To be able to ascertain society’s attitudes and reactions to Disability and Disabled people would be ‘almost impossible’ (Barnes, 1991, p.1). Among the many suggestions that have been made is the view that Renaissance ‘perceptions of impairment and Disability are coloured by a deep-rooted psychological fear of the unknown, the anomalous and the abnormal’ (Douglas, 1966) and ‘it is widely acknowledged that their perceptions of normality are partly if not wholly determined by […] the natural transmission of ideology and culture’ (Barnes, 1991, p.47). In developing this argument, Garland-Thomson (2003, p.196) suggests that:

‘Disability is a construct which means little outside of the age which makes meaning of its metaphor. We must, then, seek to understand [Disability] within the context of its age, by looking at religion, dramatic, social and political presumptions constructing Disability. It is only in this way that the formula which equates Disability and deviance can be understood in *its* time, rather than accepted, without question, in ours’.

It is therefore important to explore Renaissance ideology surrounding Disability to fully appreciate this particular point in history where ‘a communally accepted set of values and beliefs’ (Barnes, 1991, p.47) influenced Shakespeare’s audience and determined their reactions to the Disabled community. It is also important to acknowledge that examples of what we now call ‘Disability’ was not necessarily an operational identity in the Renaissance and the word itself ‘did not circulate in England until around 1545’ (Barnes, 1991, p.47). Even then, Wilson (1993) explains:

‘It most often intimated something more about an individual’s general incapacity than the fact or state of having [….] a physical or mental condition that prompted said incapacity […] therefore the emergence of "Disability" occurs later than the Renaissance and in tandem with a medical discourse that classifies, regulates, and constructs bodies as "normal" or "abnormal"’.

Disability was/is not a timeless universal. It was described and defined differently in the Renaissance and therefore it is important to look at historically specific ways in which the body was represented in the Renaissance. Whilst it should be acknowledged that individual perceptions and ideas vary slightly and there is no universal approach to Disability, historical and cultural concepts and responses to what we now know to be Disability and/or Disabled are usually more rigid. It is therefore important to look to these concepts and responses for an indication as to potentially significant influences upon Shakespeare’s presentation of Disability (Oliver, 1981 & 1990: Hanks & Hanks, 1980).

Until the seventeenth century people with Disabilities were ‘rejected by their families, along with other disadvantaged groups such as the sick, the elderly and the poor, relying upon the ineffectual tradition of Christian charity for subsistence’ (Bloy, 2002, 32). The seventeenth century represented vast developments in the views of people with Disabilities as, by this time, people with Disabilities were integrated into society and were allowed to marry, work and have children. Discrimination however did not disappear entirely during the Elizabethan period and often continued in the form of entertainment and ridicule: ‘every Disability from idiocy to insanity to diabetes and bad breath was a welcome source of amusement' (Gray & Cox, 2014, p.65). In fact, Shakespeare’s first depiction of Disability ‘was also his funniest’ (Wilson, 1993) and arrives in act two of *Henry VI part two* between Gloucester and Simpcox:

***King Henry VI:*** How long hast thou been blind?  
***Simpcox:*** O’, born so, master  
***Gloucester:*** Sayest thou me so? What colour is this cloak of?  
***Simpcox:*** Red, master; red as blood.  
***Gloucester:*** Why, that's well said. What colour is my gown of?  
***Simpcox:*** Black, forsooth: coal-black as jet.  
***Gloucester:*** Then, Simon, sit there, the lyingest knave   
 in Christendom. If thou hadst been born blind, thou  
 mightest as well have known all our names as thus to  
 name the several colours we do wear. Sight may  
 distinguish of colours, but suddenly to nominate them   
 all, it is impossible. My lords, Saint Alban here   
 hath done a miracle; and would ye not think his   
 cunning to be great, that could restore this cripple   
 to his legs again?  
***Simpcox:*** O master, that you could!  
***Gloucester:*** Well, sir, we must have you find your legs. Sirrah   
 beadle, whip him till he leap over that same stool.

*[after the beadle hath hit him once, he leaps over the stool and runs away; and they follow and cry ‘A Miracle’]*

(Shakespeare in Knowles, 2004, *Henry VI part two,* 2.1,95-145).

The hostility and suspicion presented throughout the scene establishes an undesirable Renaissance tradition; despite the fact that Gloucester is correct in Simpcox’s forgery.

Other Disabilities can be seen in the blindness of Old Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice,* and Gloucester in *King Lear.* Physical deformities can be found in Richard (*Henry VI Part Two and Three Richard III*), Thersites (*Cymberline*), and Caliban (*The Tempest)*. Physical illness is presented in the form of epilepsy or ‘the falling sickness’ in *Julius Caesar, Henry IV, Othello, Macbeth* and figuratively in *King Lear.*

Whether or not Shakespeare presented this collection of characters as having a Disability in relation to the modern-day understanding of the word’s meaning, or whether the audience is simply attaching their modern-day understanding of Disability to the character through their own interpretation of the text and traits of the role is difficult to ascertain, what is clear is that Shakespeare had an awareness of difference. With clear and important reference to the historical implications and influences of the period in which Shakespeare was creating his work the character of Richard will be explored through the lens of a modern-day interpretation of the language of Disability (as this is the only tool we have to achieve levels of understanding).

The character of Richard ‘is often taken up as Shakespeare's clearest foregrounding and interpreting of physical difference’ (Wilson, 2017), and as such Richard is an important character to explore in relation to the content of this work. The presentation of Disability will be assessed in relation to the presentation of Richard’s character and: 1) the historical views of disability, 2) Richard as a form of evil, 3) character’s varied views of disability, 4) binaries presented throughout the play, 5) Richard’s own understanding of his Disability, 6) Richard’s record of accomplishment throughout the play.

## **The Historical views of Disability**

Throughout the plays, Richard’s physical deformity is an integral focus of physical challenge and difference to the ‘normative’ and there is no doubt that Richard’s presentation is purposefully as something ‘different’. ‘Deformity’ is often used to define the depiction of Richard’s body throughout the play. This term reiterates the representation of Richard as influenced in a place and space that is not only different to our own, but historically determined. Throughout the plays it is clear that Shakespeare asks the audience to pay attention to the ‘deformed’ body of Richard in order to explore the attitudes of those reacting to someone ‘born into a world which placed a high premium upon physical normality’ (Barnes, 1991, p.2). Metzler (2016) helps to classify Richard as one of Shakespeare’s ‘Disabled’ characters, when she explains that he falls into the category of ‘extreme deformations or monstrosities; those whose physical forms did not match the most basic human, normative standards’. The inclusion of Richard’s hunchback and clubfoot places the character firmly within the Renaissance classification of Disabled.

Historically, throughout the ‘Middle-Ages people with Disabilities were the subject of superstition, persecution and rejection with Disability known to be associated with witchcraft’ (Haffter, 1968). *Richard III* presents how ghosts, bad omens, curses and prophetic dreams are a constant feature in Richard’s life. Throughout the play there are even moments when Richard blames his Disability and physical deformity on the machinations of witches, he states:

‘Then be your eyes the witness of their evil.   
Look how I am bewitch’d! Behold mine arm   
Is, like a blasted sapling, wither’d up;  
And this is Edward’s wife, that monstrous witch,   
Consorted with the harlot strumpet Shore,   
That by their witchcraft thus have marked me’

(Shakespeare in Siemon, *Richard III*, 2009, 3.4, 66-71).

The supernatural is constantly present and even Richard’s downfall is the fulfilment of a prophecy of divine will.

Richard’s Disabled body also works from representations of propaganda. Shakespeare’s play drew from sources that make a point of Richard’s appearance, for example Thomas More’s*History of King Richard III* which describes Richard as ‘little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard-favoured of visage' (More in Logan, 2005). This text has political connotations because More needed to ‘deny Richard in keeping with the Tudor monarchy in power at the time, therefore the presentation of body is also politically driven’ (Williams, 2009). In modern literary studies his body has been important in promoting a distinctive shape relative to a ‘fractured and turbulent English history, a monstrous political figure who usurps the throne’ (Williams, 2009). Therefore, it is also difficult to separate the Richard’s physical form from the representations of the body that work from levels of propaganda.

It is also important to remember that Shakespeare is writing from a predominantly fictional perspective. Although influenced by the real King Richard III, Shakespeare is using theatricality to engage his audiences. For example *Henry VI part two,* is extremely unreliable as a source that may tell us something about historical events. One example is when Richard is shown killing the Duke of Somerset at the Battle of St Albans (1455), but would have, historically, only been two years old. This highlights Shakespeare’s desire to promote theatrical fiction as more important than fact. Therefore, the historical representation of Disability in Shakespeare’s literature either places Richard as a theatrical tool, displayed as either a metaphor (see below-Richard as a form evil) or as a trope (Richard is an arch-villain), despite neither truly representing actual people with Disabilities.

## **Richard as a form of Evil**

For Williams (2009) ‘Richard III’s deformity is an attempt to conceptualise the Renaissance as a time that […] would have understood this body as evil’, and it is true that throughout the Middle Ages people with a Disability were associated with evil (Haffter, 1968). Barnes (1991, p.2) progresses this point of debate when explaining that:

‘Those that were deformed and Disabled were seen as 'changelings' or the Devil's substitutes for humans. […] any form of physical or mental impairment was the result of divine judgement for wrongdoing pervasive throughout the British Isles in this period. And the association between Disability and evil was not limited to the layman’.

Throughout the play the presentation of Richard as ‘evil’ is evident in Richard’s actions. He successfully woos Anne after killing her husband, ‘he slanders the Queen, he detains her kin and eventually, he challenges the rightful succession to the throne […] Richard exhibits a shameless irreverence for family and for tradition and is cast immediately in opposition of good’ (Eyler, 2010, p.192). Even Richard synonymises himself with words such as ‘false’, ‘treacherous’, he has ‘laid plots’ and has ‘inductions dangerous’. For the Renaissance audience Richard’s Disability is the marker of this evil ‘because that is what lingering medieval perceptions of Disability had trained them to see’ (Eyler, 2010, p.192). Therefore, Richard’s bad actions meant that his body had to be deformed to visually reflect his moral corruption (Bromley, 2013, p.43). The insults used against Richard also reference the ‘outward manifestation of the inward malignity’ (Eyler, 2010, p.194) or inner evil. Quayson (2012, p.97) explains that:

‘Richard’s Disability is deformity operating in a moral register, the Disabled body is one in which physical difference is overlaid with negative implications because of what it suggests about the moral character of the person who displays bodily difference’.

These bodily differences are captured throughout the play via a range of important and theatrical techniques and they go a long way in explaining medieval reactions to Disability and difference. Reading the play in its historical tradition demonstrates Shakespeare’s use of the unseen (evil) being depicted in the more visual clues of Disability and therefore Shakespeare’s audience are seen to need this metaphor to understand the characterisation. As an historical metaphor we accept this as part of the discourse of the time and the internal and external planes of Richard’s operations in relation to their historical implications which are reduced to the ‘demonstration of Renaissance beliefs about the continuity between inner morality and outward physical forms’ (Williams, 2009, p.2). However, Williams (2009, p.7) warns that ‘it should not be enough for today’s audiences to accept that Richard wields evil simply because he is deformed’.

Simultaneously, Shakespeare appears to question this Renaissance tradition and an alternative reading of Richard’s body would suggest that Shakespeare may provide an alternative vision as to how the Disabled body *should* be viewed. Williams’ (2009, p.4) account of the play in relation to Disability theory suggests that:

‘the play as a Renaissance version of late medieval attitudes toward deformity, focus attempts both to preserve Disability as an identity category that occurs later than the early modern period and to provide a trans-historical account of its emergence as identity’.

By the conclusion of *Richard III*, and through the articulation of Richard by Buckingham and Richard himself, Richard’s Disability is no longer foundational to his character. Buckingham realises the extent of Richard’s evil, but at no stage does Buckingham infer that this is due to Richard’s deformed body, suggesting that Shakespeare recognises each person’s responsibility for their actions, that Richard is evil in his core and this is not because of his physical surface. Williams (2009, p.6) progresses this argument when writing that ‘the notion of deformity as physical lack is finally served from Richard’s body to exist instead as a metaphysical label attached to other objects to justify political ends’.

The text, Richard’s soliloquies, actions, interactions and machinations allow Shakespeare to eliminate pity and move the focus from body to motive.

## **Character’s varied views of disability**

The variety of negative ways in which others view [Richard’s] body and attempt to employ its associations in their own struggles for political agency are also important to consider. The play offers viewpoints that both anatomize and deprecate Richard’s form. The female characters in the play often suggest that Richard displays features of monstrosity. Anne and Elizabeth describe him as a ‘diffused infection of a man’, ‘hedgehog’, ‘bottled spider’, and ‘foul bunch-backed toad’, terms used to insult (Williams, 2009). Queen Margaret articulates Richard’s body in bestial terms when stating:

***‘***Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog,   
Thou that wast sealed in thy nativity   
The slave of nature and the son of hell,   
Thou slander of thy heavy mother’s womb,   
Thou loathed issue of thy father’s loins,   
Thou rag of honours, thou detested’

(Shakespeare in Siemon, 2009, *Richard III*, 1.3, 227-232).

It is the ‘chorus of women who oppose [Richard]’ (West, 2009, p.118) that also provide the audience with an interpretation of Richard’s Disability that is founded in the idea that Richard’s ‘deformity’ is the result of a ‘failure to grow’ in the woman’s womb (‘thou slander of thy heavy mother’s womb’ (ibid)). Hobgood (in Williams, 2009) considers this engagement (amongst many others found within the play) as an example of ‘medical discourse of its own moment, pointing out that characters repeatedly read Richard’s body according to emerging ideas of diagnosis and correction advanced by early modern physicians’. The ‘failure to form’ concept suggests that Shakespeare may have had a level of medical understanding when presenting both character and narrative as a method to diagnose Richard’s difference as a matter of ‘failure to form’.

The concept is also born from reflecting upon the reality of pressure Elizabethan women would have felt to reproduce and continue the male lineage. Producing healthy, preferably male, heirs is recurrent throughout Shakespeare’s work and it is a concept that would have been immediately understood by the Renaissance audience. Playing on the audience’s fears, Shakespeare presents in Richard’s form a disappointing outcome of conception and gestation. This further plays on the popular obsession with ‘monster births in medial treatises, folklore, sermons, and wonder books, but also the anxiety of society (and patriarchy) to secure viable succession from the top echelons to the most humble communities’ (Persec, 2019, pp. 7-8). Stories of monster-births are read as cautionary tales and are often the result of women’s misbehaviour. Richard’s ‘failure to form’ therefore hints at a Renaissance preoccupation with a cultural anxiety about reproduction, maternal agency, and the medically unknown.

## **Binaries presented throughout the play**

Binaries are a further device Shakespeare utilises to highlight Richard’s bodily difference. Richmond is a character not only used to overthrow Richard, but placed throughout the play in opposition to Richard characteristically. Richard is the evil to Richmond’s pure goodness, ‘when placed next to this hero, then, it is easy and exciting to see both the antagonist and protagonist on completely opposite terms; they both become binaries’ (Alexander, 2011, p.15). Richard’s body is marked as deficient and the:

‘play ends with the figure of Richmond as the fantasy of able body: he is the warrior who is properly integrated into his family structure and will produce rightful heirs for the throne […] his kingship will usher in a newly perfect body for the state’ (Williams, 2009, p.6).

This is most clearly depicted in Richmond’s speech in Act Five:

O, now let Richmond and Elizabeth,   
The true succeeders of each royal house,   
By God’s fair ordinance conjoin together,   
And let their heirs, God, if Thy will be so,  
Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,   
With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days,   
Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,   
That would reduce these bloody days again   
And made poor England weep forth streams of blood

(Shakespeare in Siemon, 2009, *Richard III,* 5.5, 29-37).

The combination of Richmond and Richard’s binaries of body and state are metaphorically important, however as Williams (2009, p.4) argues:

‘what Shakespeare does even further is suggest that Richard is powerful in alignment with modern concepts of what it means to be Disabled […] and instead Richard as a dismodern subject challenges a binary of able/Disabled bodies […] the subject sees that the metanarratives are only socially created and accepts them as that’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Therefore the binary may work in highlighting good against evil, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that Disability is essential in playing the binary. Alexander (2011, p.120) explains that although:

‘Richard is articulate, we don’t want Richmond to be bumbling […] Richard is cunning but Richmond should not be daffy […] equally as important, just because Richard has a Disability, should Richmond be able bodied? The answer is no’.

These are moral not physical binaries and in all other manners the characters are demonstrated to compete on the same plane.

## **Richard’s own understanding of his Disability**

Richard’s own understanding of his Disability is important to explore in regards to presentation, consideration and understanding of the Disabled body and its connections to Renaissance ideologies and concepts. Richard’s awareness of his difference is acute. He states:

‘[Love] did corrupt frail nature with some bribe, To shrink mine arm up like a wither'd shrub;To make an envious mountain on my back, Where sits deformity to mock my body; To shape my legs of an unequal size; To disproportion me in every part, Like to a chaos, or an unlick'd bear-whelp That carries no impression like the dam’.

(Shakespeare in Cox & Rasmussen, 2001, Henry VI Part Three, 3.2, 155-162)

From this speech and at surface level Richard may be seen to despise his body. Other soliloquies describe that he ‘has no delight to pass away the time/ unless to spy my shadow in the sun and descant on my own deformity’ (Shakespeare in Siemon, 2009, *Richard III,* 1.1, p.154) which again suggests that he hates his Disability. His language also suggests that he regards himself as unable to pursue any type of norm, when stating: ‘But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks/Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass’ (Shakespeare in Siemon, 2009, *Richard III,* 1.1, 15-16).Medieval belief too would dictate that any one of Richard’s physical differences would impair him from participating in the ‘normal functions of every-day society’, however the complexities of the character suggest that this is not at all the case and that ‘Richard is far more than *just* a character with physical impairment […] and is therefore a slippery character for Disability studies to tackle’ (Eyler, 2010, pp.190-191). This is because Richard is successful in not only manipulating his fellow players, but also in manipulating the audience as to when to see his body to be associated with positive or negative rhetoric. In fact one of the more significant aspects of Richard’s interactions with his Disability is that throughout the play he challenges the idea that people with Disabilities are lesser or more incapable beings. Furthermore, by cleverly presenting his Disabled form as an excuse for his actions he not only presents an understanding of his form and its implications historically, but he is also able to use his deformed body as a distraction from his political manoeuvres. Williams (2009, p.7) states that Richard:

‘aware of the negative associations of his body, wields his appearance as an excuse, claiming his deformity as evidence of inability […however] there is not much Richard can’t do, and to do these things, he puts his body on view, using the multiple interpretations and expectations it prompts to achieve his ambition and the crown he desires’.

Therefore, Richard’s ‘misshapen’ form affords him agency through manipulation and it seems that ‘Richard was more Disabled by religious, dramatic, social, and political constructs, then he was by his hunch back’ (Eyler, 2010, p.193).

## **Richard’s record of accomplishment**

Richard can be seen to ‘play’ or ‘perform’ his Disability as a strategy for power and gain, and despite the contemporary reaction to Disability being one of pity, at no point do we have the sense that we are supposed to feel this for Richard. He frightens and intimidates and, in many ways, becomes the quintessential villain. Throughout the play Richard is successful in wooing women, fulfils his duties as Duke, serves as Lord Protector, becomes King and leads his army into battle-in which he also fights. Therefore, Shakespeare ‘forces the audience to question whether or not he even has a Disability: a hunchback, the text tells us, yes; but a Disability, the text tells us, no’ (Eyler, 2010, p.190).

By the third act of *Richard III*, Buckingham is able to plead Richard’s cause without one reference to his body, and instead refers to the weight of history and Richard’s patriarchal lineage in shifting the focus from body to political sovereignty. Williams (2009, p.7) writes that:

‘most significantly, any resonance of Richard’s deformed body is transferred to the nation of England as a whole, which is now situated as a precariously ailing body in need of virtuous intervention Richard himself will provide […] Buckingham re-inscribes Richard’s deformity upon the nation and casts Richard as the cure for its bodily lack’.

Alongside his achievements as a fictional character within the context of the play, Richard continues to receive admiration from critics, actors and play-goers alike. Scholars reflect that they love his frankness, his wit, his daring, and the fact that he invites his audiences to be complicit in his plans. Audiences are invited to admire his skills as an actor. He is also not straight-forwardly Machiavellian ‘he does not deny the existence of goodness or virtue or their superiority over evil, even though he eschews them in his own life’ (Keehan, 2017, p.28). Therefore Richard is a more complex character than is often acknowledged. He can be seen as a champion and defender of Disability; someone who is recognised for their talents and achievements in power. This is a much more heroic reading of Richard, and one which invites a deeper opportunity to consider the possibilities of the Disabled body, relative to the considerations of social justice.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the limitations and liabilities of reading Richard through a Renaissance context of Disability, what this type of investigation affords is an opportunity to consider the multifarious ways in which we can speak about Disability when we encounter it in Shakespeare’s texts. This helps to promote greater opportunities to consider where social justice, from the perspective of Disability, can be captured. As Wilson (1993) explains, Shakespeare’s:

‘texts can be used to generate and support theories of Disability […] and Richard’s position in the trajectory of Disabled identity offers to Shakespeare studies a rich opportunity for new understanding about the power of the deformed body, even as careful attention to the play opens up new possibilities for thinking about Disability in the Renaissance’.

Richard is not limited and Shakespeare presents radical thinking about Disability (Alexander, 2011). Jackson (2014, p.4) even goes so far as to imply that:

‘in presenting Shakespeare in alignment with modern concepts of what it means to be Disabled, Shakespeare appears somewhat ahead of his time or thinking; although he does not embrace Richard’s deformities, he does utilise them, and at times he appears to go so far as to understand them’.

The differences historically in the meaning of Disability are of paramount importance for any consideration of social justice. Although the play provides a depiction of the absolute adversity that Richard must endure because of the reception to his Disability, Richard is, in the main, able to succeed with all of his endeavours. Through the character of Richard, Shakespeare is able to provide a dynamic consideration of social justice relative to Disability through an interaction with the body; its challenges, limitations and opportunities. The character of Richard offers opportunities to ‘think about Disabled identity in the Renaissance as a complex negotiation of discourses of deformity and monstrosity as well as in relation to bodily contingency that reveals the instability of all bodies’ (Williams, 2009, p.6).

Through applying new historicism and Brecht’s historicisation it becomes clear that Shakespeare’s plays, although not universal, still remain important to explore as they can help to indicate where social justice has, and can take place. Through analytical tools of this nature, the mind can remain concentrated to view the material in its own context, to explore important social differences, and be placed at a safe distance from the issues of the play. All help to understand the aspects of social justice that are being considered within Shakespeare’s work. The differences between then and now are key as they help promote important lessons regarding social justice. As there are different forms of behaviour between then and now, it remains important to question what our contemporaries did, what we do now; and the relationship between the two, to provide a more encompassing consideration of social justice, helping to avoid copying surface details of the world as lived experiences.

The reading of Richard highlights inherent historical implications in relation to the medical discourse and terminology that underpinned the idea of Disability in Renaissance England. Shakespeare presents a character who faces adversity; but who causes it too. In Richard we see an equal mix of Renaissance values, and more modern and advanced thoughts surrounding Disability.

Although advances have been made both medically and socially in regards to Disability, the plays still hold important interrogations to unpick in relation to the consideration of social justice specific to Disability and the presentation of the body as represented through a specific time in history. The play demonstrates where social justice has been achieved and what aspects of social justice are still yet to be achieved. Although this reading warns of the complexities when using modern interpretations to understand the historical cultural clues of Disability, it simultaneously highlights how the multifarious manner in which Shakespeare’s work discusses Disability is valuable to those inside and outside of this community, particularly when it is used to consider opportunities to achieve social justice. Ultimately, Shakespeare presents multiple viewpoints on Disability, and it is this multiplicity that affords opportunities to consider social justice.

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1. Graeae Theatre, Side by Side Theatre, Taking Flight Theatre, Blue Apple Theatre [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Verfremdungseffekt: a technique used to make the audience critical about the issues being explored in the work. Distancing techniques are used to alienate the audience from becoming too absorbed in the narrative of the work and instead focus on the issue at the heart of the theatre performance. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dismodern in reference to Lennard Davis’ term which is ‘the reading of Disability as a set of relations between the body and the world, relations in which physical difference may be aided by compensatory intervention and used for powerful effect’ (Davis, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)