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Richard the Freak: The Dis-ability to Show Power

1 Disability Studies: the theoretical approach

In mythology it is a universal characteristic of men born from the Earth that at the moment they emerge from the depth they either cannot walk or they walk clumsily.

Claude Levi-Strauss’ words – which evoke the image of fascinating one legged creatures, of heroes struggling to walk upright, of crippled gods, and of limping gaits – emphasize how disability and body’s anomalies are not only biological, social, and cultural conditions, which exist in every historical time. Indeed, within Western culture, they take on a founding and representative function of the complex relationship of human beings to Earth, thus becoming important archetypes for the self-representation of the body. The totality of cultural activities establishing links between disability inscribed in the bodies and their social construction is evident; yet any form of impairment and especially its social codification as disability has been for a long time excluded from traditional fields of knowledge. This exclusion has caused a vacuum that is at the same


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time “a mirror of the socio-cultural taboo represented [...] by disability and a contribution to the reproduction of marginalization.”3

Therefore, if the persistence of an ancestral prejudice towards disability is ascribable to the cultural irrelevance willingly given to this matter – indirectly exposed by this scholarly neglect – an important role in perpetrating the logic of denial and of stigmatizing silence may also be attributed to the difficult comprehension of a term, such as “disability,” “that did not exist in the past,” a term whose meaning is muddled and ambiguous also in the present time. In fact, “[i]t is not immediately clear whether it is an expression identifying a specific disability or the person affected by that disability or the social position of the handicapped person. Often the meanings are obscure and confusing.”5 Recent researches in the field of disability studies have contributed to a partial solution of this conceptual incomprehension and to the codification of its problematic features. These studies cast an explicatory light on the phenomenon of disability. They developed along the line of cultural politics upheld by the initiative of people subjected to various forms of exclusion and marginalization; this field of research has analysed the complexity – often rejected by simplistically arbitrary interpretations – which characterizes the concept of disability by relating such a concept to a biological condition, but also by revealing the social pressure through which the person differing from the norm is designated as disabled.

Disability studies, grown out of the cultural studies established in Great Britain in the Seventies of the twentieth century, have progressively consolidated acquiring the status of an academic discipline thanks to the work of British scholars such as Mike Oliver and Vic Finkelstein. In the 1980s these analytical studies began to be recognized as a new, stimulating, and critical approach by the Anglo-Saxon world, the United States, Australia, Northern Europe, and France. Although presented under one label, disability studies appear as a diversified research field that can hardly be brought back to a sole unifying theory, as its definition seems instead to suggest. The diversification of approach can also be traced back to and determined by the programmatic will of the movement to modify the cultural paradigm through which the concept of disability is interpreted, using a research that involves a variety of disciplinary fields, such as, for instance, sociology, law, philosophy, and psychology.

Disability studies analyse the society within which the disabled person lives, they critically challenge a functionalist medical paradigm that has suggested conceptualizations regarding disability and deficiency considered as individual elements based on the causal link between impairment and disability. From the perception of disability studies, disability can no longer be conceived as a deviation from normality, nor can the social experience of the disabled person be considered without taking into account the contextual factors provoking the exclusion. In such a critical scrutiny, the distinction between impairment and disability is founding. As stressed by Leonard Davis, an important spokesperson for this critical movement, a physical deficiency implies a biological, cognitive, sensorial or psychological difference, whereas disability is the result of a negative social reaction to such a difference.

An impairment involves a loss [...] of sight, hearing, mobility, mental ability, and so on. But an impairment only becomes disability when the ambient society creates an environment with barriers- affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural.⁶

Impairment is a real and physical condition, whereas disability is a social and political construction. The very concept of normality is a cultural construct: “the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way normalcy is constructed to create the “problem” of the disabled body.”⁷ The critical charge against the medical model of the approach to disability can therefore be attributed to the assumption, supported and promoted by such an approach, that sickness is a form of deviance, a disturbance to the social order, and that disability is an “abnormal” or “unnatural’ condition in contrast with the normality of other people. According to the medical template, the integration of disabled people in society therefore envisages a process of rehabilitation and normalization.⁸

The social model⁹ constituting the theoretical framework of disability studies challenges the medical approach¹⁰ in opposing the construction of disability

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⁹ Oliver, The Politics of Disablement.
¹⁰ Although critically opposing the medical model, the social model acknowledges the contribution that medical science has brought and can still bring to the improvement of the lifestyle of disabled persons. What is criticized in this model is, rather, the gaze cast on the individual, considered as an unfortunate subject. Mike Oliver, precisely in order to avoid inaccurate critical al-
as an individual phenomenon; instead, it chooses to identify those factors that “disable” the human being (the appropriate term being “disablement”). The effort not to focus on the biological condition supported by the social model does not mean, however, forgetting the individual his/her pathological condition, but rather concentrating on issues to be shared by a subjective collectivity and therefore likely to be used in political struggles. The supporters of disability’s social model actually expose the society’s tendency to isolate the disabled person, underscoring instead the importance of cohesion in sharing ideals and objectives.

It is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society.¹¹

The study of disability’s social stigma does not involve only its medical, legal, and sociological aspect, but also the humanistic one, namely, the representation of disability in historical, literary, and artistic perspective.¹² The analysis of disability within the context of humanistic research answers to and is in correspondence with the programmatic objectives of the social model because it constitutes in itself “a way of resisting the idea that disability is a personal tragedy or a pathologised medical issue.”¹³ Far from dealing with the silence and the absence of disabled beings as found in political and social life, literary texts return very frequently and with different perspectives to the theme of disability that becomes, in turn, an effective metaphor for social anxiety, or the “fulcrum or pivot out of which various discursive details emerge, gain salience, and ultimately undergo transformation,”¹⁴ taking on “a defamiliarizing effect on the basic categories of identity and of literary criticism.”¹⁵ As for the latter aspect, Tobin Sieber in his Disability Theories strongly argues for a link between instability, disability, and identity; he calls attention to how “the presence of disability creates a different picture of identity – one less stable than identities associated with gender, race, sexuality, nation, and class – and therefore presenting the opportunity

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¹³ Hall, Literature and Disability.
¹⁴ Quayson, Aesthetic Nervousness, 34.
¹⁵ Hall, Literature and Disability, 39.
to rethink how human identity works.” Understanding and analysing the cultural and literary representation through the critical lens of disability studies implies bringing into play alternative readings concerning concepts of culture and power by analysing, first of all, the notion of norm.

Having clarified the critical potential of applying the approach of disability studies to literary research, it is however necessary to state a methodological caveat. Actually, such an analysis entails a contemporary conceptual and terminological projection on a time when disability was not a codified concept as it now is:

From a methodological viewpoint it is [...] necessary to keep in mind that the very concept of disability through time is not unequivocal. It is conceptually wrong to project onto the past our present perceptions, especially in epochs preceding the previous century, when the health conditions of the total population were much more precarious.

Contemporary criticism acknowledges the necessity of a historical sensibility that goes along with the application of theories and of contemporary concepts to the literature of the past. However, it is also appropriate to consider Lois Bragg’s belief that disability was defined and redefined in the course of years and centuries. In his Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga, Bragg highlights that in the course of the centuries different attitudes have emerged on the theme of disability, as well as different definitions of a concept at any rate always present in intellectual evaluations, in collective consciousness, and in every epoch linked to the reflection on deficiency and disability.

Recent critical studies emphasize, however, how the social process of the definition of “disabled” people has become institutionalized with the progress of industrialization and through practices and formal debates dating back to the end of the eighteenth century and nineteenth century. Proponents of English Historical Materialism (with particular reference to Antonio Gramsci’s categories, for what concerns the work of Vic Finkelstein, Mike Oliver, and Colin Barnes) have called attention to the role of industrial capitalism and the resulting development of the production sector based on assumptions of skillfulness;

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16 Sieber, Disability Theory, 5.
17 Schianchi, Storia della disabilità, 35.
19 Stiker, A History of Disability; Schianchi, Storia della disabilità; Turner, Stagg, Social Histories of Disability and Deformity: Bodies, Images and Experiences.
these factors have relegated disabled persons to a position of marginality and dependency that has found its codification in the discourse on “normality.” In support of such a position, Leonard Davis, for example, reminds us that in English the term “normal” – whose ambiguous link with the noun “norm” is more than obvious – with the meaning of “constituting, conforming to, not deviating, or different from, the common type or standard, regular, usual” entered the common language around 1840.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, the term “norm” in its contemporary meaning was included in dictionaries since 1855.

2 English Renaissance and disability

If it is only in the last part of the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth, that “the systematized, divided structure of normal and abnormal bodies [...is] institutionalized, treated, and made into a semiology of metonymic meanings,”\textsuperscript{22} the obvious question is how debates concerning non-normative identities were conducted during the Renaissance. This is the historical period when William Shakespeare wrote Richard III (1591–1592), the last of his four dramatic works dedicated to English history.

According to Allison Hobgood and David Houston Wood, a “notion of early modern disability is not anachronistic because human variation, though conceived of and responded to diversely, has always existed.”\textsuperscript{23} The text quoted above takes on and restates Bragg’s conviction, cited earlier, that disability is an identity category present in every epoch and understood to designate the “human variation.” Even if the lemma was not yet present in the dictionary, the concept of disability existed. It evoked different images, taking on different meanings when applied to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England because such a concept was strongly influenced by the scientific and cultural episteme of the time. From this perspective David Turner and Kevin Stagg in Social Histories of Disability and Deformity call attention to the fact that “in the early modern period the concept of disability was subsumed under other categories, notably deformity and monstrosity.”\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore, many critics highlight that such a topic can be connected to concepts derived from classic aesthetics, to the Medieval

\textsuperscript{21} Davis, Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body, 24, chapter 2, passim.
\textsuperscript{22} Davis, Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions, 66.
\textsuperscript{24} Turner, Stagg, Social Histories of Disability and Deformity, 4.
concept of the marvellous, and to elements of medical pathology linked to the theory of humours.

The Renaissance is a period of deep epistemic fractures during which the conflict between the new science (represented in works by Copernicus, Galileo, Vesalius, Bacon...) and the authority of ancient texts produces the very notion of modernity. The corporeal entity of the modern self comes to define itself in a lively arena, a locus of encounter and clash for an ideal body and a monstrous body, a humoral Hippocratic body, an iconic body, a body rich in symbols to be interpreted by studying the manuscripts of the great classic physicians, an astrological body and a body placed at the intersection of microcosm and macrocosm, a cross reference between plants, minerals, animals, stars, and planets. Furthermore, many critics underscore that such a topic can be connected to concepts derived from classic aesthetics to the Medieval concept of the marvellous, and to elements of medical pathology linked to the theory of humours. Such a system, culturally structured by sometime contradictory cross-references, gives to the Renaissance body a “strangeness” attributable precisely to the “survival of older conventions of representation alongside newer fashions.”

During this time there still is the notion of the classical concept of “ideal beauty” which, from a visual point of view, presupposes a body formed by the best anatomical parts of various individuals. No one embodies in himself/herself ideal beauty because the later is indissolubly connected with the divine. If the mythopoeic and divine body is unattainable by any human being, in a culture focalized on the image of the ideal body all the members of a population are not endowed with an ideal body and “there is no social pressure [...] that populations have bodies that conform to the ideal.” The counterpoint to the distance from the normality of ideal beauty is the awkward and grotesque distance from any canon of beauty: the monster.

The concept of monstrosity grows out of a social construct through which a being is perceived according to a deceptive norm; in Renaissance modernity, the monster contextualizes the relationship between disability, deformity and physical defects. However, it is important to point out that the two categories, deformity and monstrosity, are not completely equivalent. The former refers to ugliness or to physical conditions – such as, for instance, missshapen or crippled limbs that could cause functional damages. It is a concept bearing a social stigma, although accepted by civil or canonic law.

25 Renaissance Bodies: The Human Figure in English culture c. 1540 – 1660, eds. Lucy Gent, Nigel Llewellyn (London: Reaktion Books, 1995).
The latter, monstrosity, includes congenital defects, believed to be caused by either excess or deficiency of the semen ejaculated during conception. In addition, monsters constitute significant social metaphors allowing for the conceptualization of characteristics that could actually refer to disability, but they could also address a critique of the political, social, and moral system (in fact, monstrous births were considered as bearers of messages addressed to holders of political, religious or moral power).

The impact of the idea of monstrosity is broadened by its being an absolute concept that forces the law to question its own rules in the institution of socially inclusive and exclusive hierarchies:

Within the traits that make a body monstrous – that is, frightening or ugly, abnormal or disgusting – we may read the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person, a foreigner and a native.²⁷

The analysis of the dramatically monstrous body, representing a symptomatic complexity of fears, brings about a reflection on human variability and on a modern and pre-modern subjectivity, making Renaissance representation of the abnormal body an instrument for re-reading and re-interpreting a historically distant cultural imagination of disability: “Renaissance cultural representations of non-standard bodies might provide new models for theorizing disability that are simultaneously more inclusive and specific than those currently available.”²⁸

Within the complex Renaissance episteme, the ideal and the monstrous body are juxtaposed to the humoral body. The medical paradigm of the four humours is of great importance also for the Renaissance discourse about disability because the very notion of pre-modern and Renaissance individuality can be constructed as a historicized inquiry about the body’s variations and differences. The fundamental concept of material incarnation, as conceived within the theory of humors (a mixing of the four main humours: choleric, sanguine, melancholic, and phlegmatic), is implicitly based on imperfection: excesses or deficiencies of humoral components create bodily differences of temperament. This consideration introduces the allusion to an initial definition of disability as excess or deficiency with respect to, in the specific case of the theory of humours, an even means of equilibrium and proportion. At the same time, however, the representative transformism of the humoral selves in Renaissance works shows the precarious-

²⁸ Hobgood, Houston Wood, “Introduction: Disabled Shakespeare.”
ness of the matter of which pre-modern identity is composed, thus making pre-modern categories of disability much more unstable than the present ones.

In its use of vocabulary related to the ideal, the monstrous, the misshapen, and the humours, the philosophical and cultural representation of disability reveals how in the Renaissance a disabled identity may be considered both as a complex negotiation of the discourse on deformity and monstrosity, and also as a perception of identity as fluid matter in continuous negotiation and, as such, remarkably contemporary.

However, the Renaissance period is also characterized by an important epistemological leap²⁹ from the theory of humours, according to which the self is conceived as a “semi-permeable irrigated container in which humours moved sluggishly”³⁰, to the successive Cartesian philosophy, where the self is perceived as “a static, solid container, only barely breached, autonomous in principle from culture and environment, tampered only with diseases and experts.”³¹ What happens, therefore, is an epochal transformation of identity categories with a transfer from a “humoral” self in constant connection and dialogue with its environment to a self characterized by a marked dualism and essentially isolated from the environment. It is precisely the liminality of Renaissance writing, the act of writing at the threshold of this epistemological transformation, that makes the representation of disability in Renaissance works so challenging and so far from contemporary perspective and yet sometimes so close to and precursory of themes present in our own time:

early modern English authors portray stigmatized illness, disease, and deformity- in a word, disability- by conceiving of it in ways that can simultaneously appear either entirely alien to current Western (that is, Cartesian) ways of thinking or, on the contrary, as utterly and even painfully familiar.³²

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³⁰ Paster, _The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Discipline of Shame in Early Modern England_, 8.

³¹ Sutton, _Philosophy and Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism_, 41.

3 Richard III and disability

Richard III has often been read and interpreted through the analysis of his body, which has been connected to the stormy fractures that developed within English history. Thus, Richard is a monstrous political figure who usurps the throne, an emblematic witness of the Renaissance creed according to which there is continuity between inner morality and exterior appearance. Richard’s deformity embodies and represents all that is wrong in Richard, in England, and in the cosmos, in the attempt to condensate a wider and deeper disorder in the visible body of a single person.

Michael Torrey, for instance, analyses Richard’s deformity through the critical perspective of physiognomy, attributing the peculiar success of Richard’s politics to the complex and ambivalent approach to deformity in the Renaissance. Mark Thornton Burnett too connects Richard’s political ambivalence to the concept of monstrosity, underscoring how the King’s incompleteness, his “unfinished state” may be an effective and sinister image of the succession crisis that might have happened at the end of Elizabeth I’s reign. Linda Charnes as well emphasizes that “Shakespeare’s audience would immediately have recognized Richard’s physical deformity and moral depravity as a synecdoche for the state,” since in pre-modern England “the body was one signifier in an elaborate network of signification in which God’s signature could be read in the physical world.” In the play there are in fact numerous references to the anomaly of political transactions and to the deep connection of such an anomaly with Richard’s deformity. An emblematic example can be found in the bitter words of Anne Neville’s grief for the death of Henry VI:

Foul devil, for God’s sake, hence, and trouble us not;
For thou hast made the happy earth thy hell
Fill’d it with cursing cries and deep exclaims.
If thou delight to view thy heinous deeds,
Behold this pattern of thy butcheries
O, gentlemen, see, see! Dead Henry’s wounds
Open their congeal’d mouths and bleed afresh!

Blush, Blush, thou lump of foul deformity;
For 'tis thy presence that exhales this blood
From cold and empty veins, where no blood dwells;
Thy deed, inhuman and unnatural,
Provokes this deluge most unnatural. (1.2.51–62)

In the critical stance mentioned above it is obvious that “the use of deformity as master metaphor for social ill serves to suppress the personal and social implication of disability.”  

Considering Richard as a liminal figure, “a Renaissance version of late medieval attitudes toward deformity” helps understanding the negativity attributed in the play to his body, to a physicality that is a sign indicating, showing, announcing, and predicting. The critical approach of disability studies allows instead for the analysis of Richard III as a work about the power of the disabled body. With an anticipatory awareness that bodily experiences and physical illnesses are constructed and mediated by culture and society, Richard takes advantage of the language of deformity to describe his physicality, playing with the plurality of meanings of his deformity, thus morphing it into a technology of power.

From this perspective, the famous lines “My conscience hath a thousand several tongues/ And every tongue brings in a several tale” (5.3.205–207), beside describing conscience as a great political force, could pre-announce a prism of interpretative possibilities. In fact, such words could contribute to trace the image of Richard himself as a creature with multiple performances of his identity and physicality, thus becoming also a metaphoric allusion to the interpretative plurality of the idea of disability in the work itself; such a plurality may refer to the above mentioned coexistence of different epistemological approaches about the body.

Richard literally places his body on the stage sometimes to emphasize and sometimes to minimize his physical difference. His physical impairment is always present, but Richard consciously plays with the cultural construction of disability: he transforms his body into a dynamic entity that not only opposes and refuses the script assigned to him, but also uses such a script to his own advantage. Let us consider now some examples of these multiple performances that offer a post-modern possibility “of a mutable self, of a fluidity of subjectivity.”

36 Turner, Stagg, Social Histories of Disability and Deformity, 9.
37 Mitchell, Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse, 102.
We may ponder first on the stunning verbal power of the first monologue when Richard appears on the stage walking with enraged deformity and looking at the audience straight in the eye:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son of York,
And all the clouds that lourèd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,
Our bruisèd arms hung up for monuments,
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front;
And now, instead of mounting barbèd steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking glass;
I, that am rudely stamped and want love’s majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up (1.1.1–23)

Richard’s description of his own physical aspect emphasizes the conscious manipulation of his physicality, underscoring the dramatic qualities of a body capable of taking on different nuances and appearances in order to answer the aims and needs of a manipulating “I.”

Let us examine now the words Richard used in his opening monolog: “curtailed of this fair proportion,” “cheated of feature,” “deformed, unfinished, sent before my time,” “scarce half made up”. These words, left to resound in the spectators’ ears, blend and mingle together, evoking the words with which freak shows’ presenters invite the public to stop and admire the fun fair phenomenon on display: “Step up and see the bearded lady, the single skeleton with two heads, the baby with one eye-socket and no nose!,” and again “Step right up...see the most astonishing aggregation of human marvels and monstrosities gathered together in one edifice.”39

As noted by many critics, the Shakespearean public was familiar with phenomena of representation of diversity – “by the sixteenth century [...] representations of monstrous bodies, rather than the physical bodies themselves, circulated freely within and beyond Europe in the print culture that witnessed an explosion in the early modern period,”⁴⁰ as well as with phenomena of representation of diversity as a spectacle.

Showing anomalous persons for the sake of spectacle is not a practice limited to caravans and fair grounds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but was already popular in Shakespeare’s time. The custom of the time to exhibit abnormal bodies in taverns or at crossroads became official in the nineteenth century with freak shows:

the early itinerant monster-mongers who exhibited human oddities in taverns and the slightly more respectable performances in rented halls evolved in the mid-nineteenth century into institutionalized, permanent exhibitions of freaks in dime museums and later in circus sideshows, fairs, and amusement park midways.⁴¹

Therefore, the present interpretative hypothesis presumes that the opening soliloquy should conjure a figure with unusual shape and diversified perspective: the freak⁴². Such a figure must be understood in the context of a historical period characterized, as underscored earlier, by the simultaneous presence of cultural and philosophical beliefs, often diverging for what concerns the definition of the dis-abled body. If in Shakespeare’s work there is no invitation to stop

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and look since Richard addresses an already present, real, and imaginary audience, the voice and the words, in an astute intertwining of images and symbols, are apt to communicate — in the theater work as well as in the freak shows — a public identity for the exhibited person that may arouse interest and curiosity among the audience.

With his being and his words, Richard insinuates himself, by deconstructing it, into the clear distinction, even in his own time, between the “monster-monger” evoked in the passage quoted above — the lucid and rational itinerant monster-monger — and the exhibited “human oddity,” namely, the person morphed into an object of gazing. First spectator of himself, pleased with but also amazed by his histrionic interpretations, Richard is the actor and his public, the scene to be filmed and the camera framing it, it is the thought taking action at the very moment in which the thought is formulated.

Anticipating the contemporary politics of transgression, Richard manipulates the watchful and idiomatic mechanism of the freak performance, making himself both uttering “subject” and “object” exhibited in the performance. In so doing, he destroys the rigidity of certainty and the clear line of distinction between able and un-able, rational and irrational, man and animal.

The proposed reading perspective, focalized on the figure of the freak and on the role of the freak show, may be considered problematic from the viewpoint of disability studies. If the freak show is considered as a spectacle focused on the disabled person, such a spectacle has the function of structuring and codifying normality by contrasting it with the abnormality of the exhibited body; in this case, it is necessary to protect the disabled person from being exploited by a cultural fetishism legitimating a compulsive necessity to define and control physical differences. However, the dialogue between disability, cultural, and performance studies, has recently led numerous critics to reconsider the freak show, underscoring its value as a “site for contesting some of the cultural logics it enacts.”

For example, Robert Bogdan calls attention to the fact that scholars and activists connected with the disability world, in their desire to protect disabled persons from being exploited, have mistakenly underestimated the degree of independence and freedom granted by freak shows to such persons.

First of all, it is possible to consider the freak performance staged by Richard as an early example of independent control of his narrative — or of an attempt to control it; such an attempt morphs his crippled body into a readable and deci-

pherable text. Since Richard’s experience of himself is inseparable from his reading of his body’s signs as a signifying text, Richard tries to take control of the social construction and manipulation of the body as signifier. Instead of negating his disability or depriving it of its expressive ability, Richard uses it, moulds it, exacerbates it, makes it “freak,” morphing it into an instrument of power and validation of disability. In so doing, Richard puts into question the power logics that, in the course of the centuries, have brought about the conviction that disabled people are incapable of making sense of their experiences, thus depriving them of voice and communication. “The cultural representation of disability,” as Thomas Couser argues, “has functioned at the expense of disabled people, in part because they have rarely controlled their own images.”

The play’s tragic conclusion, as it will be argued later, invalidates Richard’s power performance. Even if ineffective, Richard’s attempt reminds the reader, especially the informed contemporary reader, that the body is always “labelled as” something else in representational economies; […] “labelled as” identifies metaphorically the space between the materiality of the body and the materializing of cultural difference.” In fact, labelling the body as disabled or unnatural transcends its mere physicality and makes visible the sphere of cultural practices that historically defines such a physicality. In an intelligent and anticipatory appropriation of the figures, symbols, and stage setting of the freak shows, Richard’s disability performance begins to deconstruct the mechanism that supports and legitimizes these cultural practices, thus compelling readers and spectators to question their own complicity in the construction and definition of the freak. At any rate, the freak’s performance defines itself as destabilizing because it complicates and explodes the space between signifier and signified, showing and demonstrating that the freak is a cultural construction.

From such a perspective, it should be noted that Richard begins his first monologue with an imperious “Now,” a word repeated twice in the subsequent lines. Richard’s preoccupation with time and the cyclic emphasis with which the word “now” is repeated, seem to nod at the “natural” rhythms of life and things, underscoring how such rhythms define also the social normative paradigms of actions and body conduct. The subsequent description of himself as different, as excluded from these natural rhythms, becomes a way to assert and justify his inadequacy in respecting such norms. But there is more: by offering his

46 Charmaine Eddy “Material difference and the supplementary body in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple” in Body Matters, eds. Avril Homer and Angela Keane (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 100.
own body as a deforming mirror that does not reflect the reality it represents, Richard challenges the personal “I” and the extended “I” of the audience by bringing back his being a freak, and therefore his exclusion from natural rhythms, to the mere order and ontological level of the narrative. Thus, identity is just an endless play of mirrors in a circus-like spectacle. The freak body is not only exhibited, but it is also staged as an unstable and destabilizing product of the dynamic relationship between performer, audience, and theatrical space.⁴⁷

The stage setting, the deliberate emphasis on alterity, and the relationship between freak and audience (elements that, according to David Hevey, are part of what he defines as “process of enfreakment,”⁴⁸) transform the “freak of nature,” namely the person born with congenital or genetic malformations, into “freak of culture” that representational practices and socio-cultural processes try to silence, to turn away from the norm.

Ever since Shakespeare’s time, the freak has constituted the re-elaboration in ludic form of the exclusion and stigmatization of disability, and the freak body is precisely the locus of metamorphosis and transformation. The cultural and physical volatility of the freak body – the refusal ingrained in the body to adhere to a natural order that, in turn, ratifies a social order – makes it socially and politically disruptive.

These considerations suggest a further interpretation of Richard’s power performance that could be connected to the basic theme of the state of exception, as argued by Rebecca Lemmon in her “Tyranny and the State of Exception in Shakespeare’s Richard III.”⁴⁹ So far we have highlighted the extent to which Renaissance performance practices labelled Richard’s presence as transgression of natural limits, transgression of classifications, and transgression of the social system of reference. It has also been emphasized how Richard’s freak performance has embraced the volatile opportunities offered by his deformity “for raising important questions about the naturalization of concepts of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’.”⁵⁰ However, it should be noted that Richard’s freak performance literally stages political and legal effects connected with Richard’s (bodily) state of exception.

In many lines throughout the work Richard’s body is discussed and stigmatized by the other characters: Anne and Elisabeth deride Richard describing him as “diffused infection of a man,” “hedgehog,” “bottled spider,” and “foul bunch-backed toad,” all expressions recalling anomalous and inhuman bodies. However, Richard’s real monstrosity – a category that at that time, as noted earlier, differed from infirmity or deformity – is codified by Margaret’s words:

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 (1.3.228–231)

Margaret seems to draw her imagery from the vocabulary and the categories introduced by erudite treatises about monsters in Shakespeare’s time. The monster is such by birth (“wast sealed in thy nativity”) and his different physical shape is the result of an erroneous mixing of the male and female semen (evoked in the text by “heavy mother’s womb” and “thy father’s loins”) or by the inadequate reproductive strength of the male semen or by the negative influence of the female menses. If Richard is a monster, he represents not only an infraction to nature’s order, but also, as Michel Foucault argues, a juridical enigma. For civil, religious, and canonic law, monstrosity, in difference from infirmity:

is the kind of natural irregularity that calls law into question and disables it. Law must either question its own foundations, or its practice, or fall silent, or abdicate, or appeal to another reference system, or again invent a casuistry. Essentially the monster is casuistry that is necessarily casuistry introduced into law by the confusion of nature.¹²

However, the monster, aware of being “a legal labyrinth, a violation of and an obstacle to the law, both transgression and undecidability at the level of the law” passively awaits to be normalized; the freak’s exemplary quirkiness, purposely staged by Richard, reveals how the normative social system describes as innate an identity which is, instead, imposed:

¹¹ Jakob Rueff, De conceptu et generatione hominis (1554); Conradus Lycosthene, Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon (1557); Lievin Lemnes, Occulta naturae miracula (1559); Gerolamo Cardano, De rerum varietate (1557); Ambroise Parè, Des monstres et prodiges (1573).
Freaks are above all products of perception: they are the consequence of a comparative relationship in which those who control the social discourse and the means of representation recruit the seeming truth of the body to claim the center for themselves and banish others to margins.  

Richard decides to create a new center that, considering his diversity, is necessarily ex-centric, therefore distant from the normative center. For example, when the dying king Edward IV tries to secure peace in his kingdom, Richard turns his misshapen body into sign and exhibition of his exceptional status:

Because I cannot flatter and look fair,  
Smile in men’s faces, smooth, deceive and cog,  
Duck with French nods and apish courtesy,  
I must be held a rancorous enemy. (1.3.47–50)

Richard describes himself as “physically” predestined to break the rules of decorum in order to uphold an “ex-centric” truth; in fact, his very body seems to keep him away from social normative attire. He stresses the congruence between his person and his appearance: his body becomes an authentic and reliable text because his deformity prevents Richard from building himself according to the parameters of a normality that actually does not belong to him.

In the specific case, his physical difference implies and presupposes a different behaviour, marked by an integrity that is not present in the court environment characterized, instead, by fictitious and illusory “apish courtesy.” Richard’s objection “I cannot [...] look fair” baffle the gazing subject and the object of such a gaze, wilfully invalidating the spectators’ perspective. In fact, Richard induces his audience to see what he wants of his body and he has such a power that the viewers must, partially at least, accept his description of reality.

In the course of the play, this freak and ex-centric Richard interrupts and deconstructs the ceremonies connected to rites of passage (from funereal mourning, to specific funeral rites, to marriage), and “deforms” the juridical institutions linked to succession and inheritance. With Hastings’ execution, he goes as far as suspending the “form of law” in name of his own security and that of the state (“The peace of England”).

54 Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature, 62.  
Richard: “What? Think you we are Turks or infedels?
Or that we would, against the form of law,
Proceed thus rashly in the villain’s death,
But that the extreme peril of the case,
The peace of England, and our persons’ safety,
Enforced us to this execution? (3.5.41–46).

The simultaneous suspension of the law and its affirmation is a true narrative representation of the concept of “state of exception.” From a theoretical viewpoint, the state of exception is that figure of the order suppressed and constantly broken in which “the normative aspect of law can thus be obliterated and contradicted with impunity by a governmental violence,” thus producing a permanent state of emergency. And yet, although generating “a juridical vacuum,” the state of exception “still claims to be applying the law.”⁵⁶ Within this state, the practice of pure violence unleashed by law enforces the *fictio juris* according to which it is always the law that can impose order. Therefore, if the state of exception appears as “the legal form of what cannot have legal form,” Richard represents a strong form of the state of exception “drawing on physical and political distortion of form.”⁵⁸ The source of Richard’s charisma and political power derives precisely from his not having legal form, from his exceptional status as a “monster” that denounces and rescinds normative limits, thus offering him physical, political and even epistemological freedom.⁵⁹ If the orderly body, the able body is the normative result of the state of law, the (dis)orderly body, the (dis)abled body can only be connected to the state of exception where the volatile force of Richard’s freak performance allows for a process of re-definition of social identity. In such a process, the tyranny of the normal and the normative is openly denounced.

In this perspective let us consider Richmond’s ascent to the throne. It is characterized by the same violations of legal precepts that marked Richard’s:

Both seek the hand of Elizabeth; both usurp the crown from a ruling prince; both dream of their own exceptionalism the night before the battle […]; and both deploy nationalist rhetoric based in emotion and instinct, rather than law and reason.⁶⁰

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The end of the play, however, justifies and glorifies Richmond’s illegal rebellion because it aims at re-establishing the normative order in an England that “hath long been mad” (5.5.23), and, in so doing, it invalidates Richard’s performance as a disabled person. This performance is defined as “mad” because Richard has put into question deeply rooted social, cultural, and legal paradigms. From the freak’s political approach, the conventional ending insists on and shows how true tyranny is in fact normality.

Beside questioning the limits of legal legitimacy in the definition of the disabled body, out of historical necessity involving the period of the composition of Richard III, the last act reintroduces the fantasy of an “ideal” body in Richmond’s character. This element invalidates Richard’s power performance, suggesting the impossibility of upholding the strength of disability in a culture where ability is valued. On the eve of the battle of Bosworth, both Richmond and Richard appeal to St. George, the patron saint of England iconically connected with the dragon’s killing. Let us now examine the two invocations: Richmond’s words – “God, and Saint George, Richmond, and victory” (5.3.270) – with the explicit invocation to God, allude to a battle for a superior cause. Richard’s words, “This and St. George to boot” become instead the verbal translation of his physical aspect, taking on twisted and contradictory traits. Richard evokes St. George, aware of the fact that the “able” normative system around him expects this conduct from a king and a leader. However, he later ambiguously urges his troops to be inspired and driven by the fury of the dragon, St. George’s antagonist: “Our Ancient word of courage, fair Saint George,/ Inspire us with the spleen of fiery dragons.” (5.3.349 – 350).

Like the national patron he invokes, Richmond frees England from a monstrous body that, like the dragon symbolizing it, “figurant, lui, la Bête-en-nous,- qu’il faut tuer, c’est-à-dire rejeter.”⁶¹

In the fight between St. George and the dragon, Richmond is St. George from whom he draws physical strength kept in check by moral strength (thus coming close to the concept of the “ideal” body); with his twisted and crippled body, Richard is the dragon that must be killed, rejected in order to re-establish a clear line of distinction between able and disabled, normal and abnormal, monstrous and ideal. The discursive practices of hegemonic power linked to the definition

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of acceptability of bodies implies “the emptying (kenosis) of normalcy [...] through the purging of those beings that confuse, [and] are misrecognizable.”

Finally, Richard’s performance, analysed from the freak point of view, leads to a discussion of Lindsay Dawn Row-Heyveld’s interpretative hypothesis according to which “Richard, albeit genuinely impaired, enacts a performance of disability that clearly links him to the charity-hungry thieves of rogue literature and to the tradition of the counterfeiter on the early modern stage.” Row-Heyveld attributes Richard’s rise to power to the “manipulation of his audiences’ charitable impulses;” she reads into Shakespeare’s work a warning to replace charity with suspicion “when dealing with people with disabilities, fraudulent or otherwise.”

The category of crippled beggars was well known in Shakespeare’s time and was considered suspicious because crippled beggars hoped to arouse empathy and to get alms precisely for their obvious inability to work. Furthermore, frequent simulations of malformation had induced the state to introduce a distinction, from a legal point of view, between persons unable although willing to work (“the deserving poor”), who could enjoy the benefits of alms, and persons unwilling to work (“the undeserving poor”).

An early definition of disability links such a condition to the inability to work, and therefore to the necessity of benefitting from alms. The fear of simulation, strengthened and validated by legal codification, appeared forcefully in every aspect of English Renaissance culture and found literary expression in popular ballads, a literary genre known as “rogue literature” and in those shows that could be defined as “fraudulent disability plays,” suitable to educate spectators to be suspicious and watchful in dispensing alms.

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66 Among contemporary works that can be included in the genre of “fraudulent disability plays” or containing references to the theme of the fraudulent beggar, we should mention (in alphabetical order): Richard Brome, The City Wit (1629–30); Richard Brome, A Jovial Crew, or The Merry Beggars (1641); George Chapman, The Blind Beggar of Alexandria (1595–96); Thomas
The deceitful appeal to public or even government generosity, exposed in fraudulent disability plays, or the attempt at arousing empathic commiseration for the crippled beggars, is very different, however, from the logic of freak shows’ artists who refused compassion as a mode of show, since “pity did not fit in with the world of amusement.”

Often freak artists did not consider themselves as disabled persons needing public pity, rather they tended “to construct themselves as skilled performers whose bodies allowed them to lead normal, if not extraordinary, lives, a fact that was clearly central to their public personae.” These words do not connect the size of the able body with conformity, expectations, social constructions, but with the ability to act using one’s own disability or deficiency as “technology performance.”

Once more the freak perspective allows for the dismantling of the dichotomy able/disabled with anticipatory reference to the new approaches toward disability that find their theoretical codification in Lennard Davis’ *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions.* Davis presents the condition of disability as a fundamental and essential characteristic of the postmodern that he defines as dismodern, precisely because of this new conception. The awareness that all human beings in some way or at some moment of their lives are “wounded” or “maimed” leads Davis to state that “impairment is the rule, and normalcy is the fantasy.”

By availing himself of his deformity as power technology, Richard fits Davis’ concept of dismodern subject. Considering Richard as a dismodern subject enables us to observe how, in different ways, all the bodies described in the play – from the king’s dying body, to the nation as a metaphoric body, from the soldiers’ wounded body to the wasted body of Margaret, Henry VI’s widow – are unstable. Richard challenges the dichotomy able/disabled bodies showing how everybody starts with or reaches a condition of disability at a certain moment in life: in this way he rejects the narration of modernity that insists on the description of a sub-

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60 Chiara Battisti


ject with an able body whose complete independence suggests the possibility of perfection.

Thus Richard gives a provocative potential to the category of disability by revealing its aspect as that of an unstable category. With his emphasis on the multiple ways through which his body difference is negotiated within the text, he allows for the observation that these repeated performances, even in the case of a normatively able identity, “[are] bound to fail, as the ideal able-bodied identity can never, once and for all, be achieved.”
