

from Tobin Siebers, “Shakespeare Differently Disabled”

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Ophelia: ‘Alas, Sweet Lady, What Imports This Song?’

Ophelia is Hamlet's love interest. This is her role. She seems otherwise peripheral to the play. Other characters dismiss her. She says or does nothing to advance the plot. No one bothers to listen to her until she begins to sing:

Enter Ophelia playing on a lute, and her hair down, singing

Ophelia. Where is the beauteous Majesty of Denmark?
Gertrude. How now, Ophelia?
Ophelia. (sings)
 How should I your true love know
 From another one?
 By his cockle hat and staff,
 And his sandal shoon.
Gertrude. Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?

When Ophelia begins to sing, Everything changes. The members of the Court pay attention to her. They do it because they think that she has lost her mind, and I believe that they can diagnose why she is mad from her songs. Gertrude puzzles over the meaning of Ophelia's singing, and Claudius responds, in effect, by diagnosing the young woman as mad ‘Conceit upon her father’ (4.5.44). Finally, when Laertes hears his sister singing, he makes the same diagnosis, offering the definitive pronouncement on her before she dies: ‘A [end page 447] document in madness’ (4.5.179). According to Laertes, Ophelia provides the kind of case study that medical students today may examine as they prepare for professional life.

Critics of Hamlet appear to have the same response to Ophelia. They, too, listen to her mad songs, and their reaction is, for the most part, diagnostic. They think that they will understand the reason for Ophelia's madness if they discover the origin of her songs. ‘The song texts’, Leslie C. Dunn explains, ‘have attracted considerable attention, much of it aimed at identifying to whom or what Ophelia's fragmentary ballad quotations refer, and thereby seeking to establish the cause of her madness.’ The problem is that no one has discovered the origins of the songs, and at least two critics think that Ophelia's madness is more powerful that way. Carol Neely concludes that ‘Ophelia's madness is represented almost entirely through fragmentary, communal, and thematically coherent quoted discourse’, while Scott Trudell argues that ‘it is precisely the lack of a definitive source for her recycled song-speech, and its refusal to congeal and writing, that allow her to become so affecting’.

Ophelia presents another case where diagnostic readings fail to grasp what disability represents, because disability is neither a condition of a person nor a construct of an oppressive environment, but a

complex embodiment involving the mutual transformation between the body and its environment. However, what is different and crucial about Ophelia's dramatic presence – what makes it the needed supplement to Falstaff's complex embodiment of physical disability – is the focus on mental disability. Without Ophelia, the disability studies of which Falstaff could be the standard-bearer would remain a physical disability studies. Ophelia embodies the knowledge of what it means to be a mentally disabled woman in her society. The mad songs represent a body of knowledge made public, directed to know one person, directed to everyone, designed to adjust the meaning around her. But Ophelia accomplishes much more. In addition to embodying madness as knowledge, she discovers that to be a woman in a sexist society is to be disabled, and that the knowledge of the disability requires the representation of madness as self-evidently female. There is reason in her madness, and the reason is the sex-gender system. Ophelia's 'mad appearance, with her "hair down, singing" (as the first quarto has it)', according to Trudell, 'is among the most embodied spectacles of the early modern stage'. But Ophelia's appearance on that stage is spectacle precisely because it incorporates madness and femininity in one complex embodiment:

Ophelia. Pray you let's have no words of this. But when they ask you what it means, say you this:
(She sings)
"Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.'
Then up he rose, and donned his clothes, [end page 448]
And dugged the chamber door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more....
By Gis, and by Saint Charity,
Alack, and fie for shame!
Young men will do't, if tye come to't,
By Cock, they are to blame.
Quote she, 'Before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed.'
'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
An thou hadst not come to my bed.' (4.5.47-64)

Ophelia and bodies as Madness the unacceptable knowledge of her sexual misuse by the people at court, including family members. As mundane as the idea is that men exploit women, make false promises to them about marriage, and have sex with them only to abandon or betray them, it could be exposed only under the cover of madness. Ophelia's mad songs, sung in public, where no proper lady would burst into song, recount her sad individual Fate In addition to the fate of many young women, in full knowledge that they are unequal treatment is a running joke among the male population. The knowledge embodied in Ophelia's songs emerges from the sustained experience of women's disablement – and knowledge won by living on the margins of power for a long time and observing the society that traps are there what Laertes calls 'a document in madness' (4.5.179) is the product of Ophelia's rebellion against everything supposedly known of her as a woman.

Joan Riviere's concept of the masquerade, it is worth remembering, takes its origin from the specific requirement that women pass in men's company using 'womanliness', that is, the Stereotype whose defining features are weakness, passivity, and sexual receptivity, thereby reversing the usual logic that defines passing as an imitation of the socially dominant position. The Masquerade also characterizes, I argue, one pole and the range of passing behavior used by disabled people. What is not made clear by the overlap between women and disabled people is that masquerading for women exposes the fact that their societies require them to appear as if they are disabled – which explains why Iris Young observes that 'women in sexist societies are physically handicapped'. But Young, as a phenomenologist, overemphasizes one part of the formula. Because her emphasis is the visible world where women twist their bodies to appear as physically impaired, she perceives what sexist society rarely makes visible: the vision of the physically disabled woman. Whence the fact that a woman character who presents as Richard III does – hunchbacked, limping, arm withered – is almost unimaginable in the theater. But this is not true for mental disability. Madwomen [end page 449] are everywhere. For either mental disability is paradigmatically gendered female or women's mental state is always already disabled. In any case, the simple truth that women in sexist society are disabled often depends on the anything but simple equation between femininity and madness.

Ophelia may embody the knowledge of women's disablement only through madness, but this knowledge, once embodied, invites the accusation of madness anyway. This vicious circle, inescapable as it is, plus the predicament that is Ophelia's Madness: to know herself as woman only in madness. The example of Ophelia's madness, then, as another tenet to disability studies, revealing that sexuality, sex-gender, and disability exist in multiple reciprocity – and in two opposing ways.

First, the tenet that sex-gender and sexuality exist in multiple relations with disability demonstrates that no single term has meaning without the others as component parts. In fact, the meanings of sex-gender and sexuality are in complete unless inflected by disability – a fact that explains, for example, why Hamlet and others so easily conceive of Ophelia as wanton, morally frail, hysterical, and ultimately mad. As a woman, Ophelia is marked as biologically inferior to them in court, and they are free to expand her disability. Similarly, there is no system of disability without complementary ideals provided by sex-gender and sexuality; these ideals depend on bodily consistency, flawlessness, health, and normative mental States, and anyone who fails to achieve these ideals will immediately attract accusations of physical and mental disability.

Second, this new tenet helps to expose the multiple and dangerous support among the sex height and gender system, sexuality, and the ideology of ability. The ideology of ability commands that sex, gender, and sexuality be calibrated against disability, with the result that these terms are considered to be able-bodied, if they are to have meaning at all.

When Ophelia seems deepest in her madness, apparently beyond the reach of other people, she is in fact the most knowledgeable about her society. To attack court society and its treatment of women risks to be thought mad, but to embed this critique in madness from the beginning, effectively reversing the expected order, outpaces the ability of the court to control the critical powers that Ophelia gathers to herself. That Ophelia launches her critique in song not only ensures that she will have the Court's attention; it also embraces before the fact that accusation of madness that will be made against her. To sing, for Ophelia, is to claim disability and its capacity to represent points of view on the margins of power. In fact, it might be said that song is the only vehicle by which Ophelia may counterfeit an identity

capable of exposing the cruelty of her society – and identity that is increasingly authoritative as it descends into madness.

In the case of Falstaff, episodes of counterfeiting – passing as non-disabled or masquerading as more disabled – demonstrate knowledge and skills accumulated as a long-time disabled person, and this body of knowledge and they both his greatest inside. These insights not only allow. To survive; they contribute to the knowledge of the audience about the world on the stage, providing as well the opportunity to think differently about their own world. This ability gives to Falstaff the ability to hold contradictory positions and to think as an unfixed subject – skills that define him in the minds of many critics as a modern subject. **[end page 450]**

Ophelia has reason to masquerade as mad – to add one more layer of stigma to her marginal status as a young woman, especially if it enhances her social criticism – her behavior before and after the mad songs seems to include no signs of counterfeiting. Ophelia's intentions are difficult to pin down because she does not address her disability explicitly and because her madness intersects almost seamlessly with her gender status. But evidence exists in different forms and in different places. We observe Falstaff and Richard III acknowledging their intentions, ideas, and motivations. We observe Ophelia from a different angle, one free of the self-conscious talk by which both Falstaff and Richard claim their disabilities. Ophelia does not need to acknowledge that she is counterfeiting madness. To claim disability, she has only to show that her madness carries the body of knowledge given by disability. Perhaps, 'to show' puts it too strongly. It is not up to Ophelia to show anything. It is the task of interpretation to conclude that her madness conveys a knowledge critically linked to disability. Ophelia is one of the first in a long line of women whose madness is interpreted to be a direct response to the oppression and disablement of gender. Ophelia discovers that to be a woman and a sexist society is to be disabled. But the knowledge of this disability requires the vehicle of another disability, in this case madness, if it is to be communicated. Ophelia tops off her knowledge as a disabled woman with a counterfeit of madness. From this madness comes the knowledge that cannot be expressed in any other way. It is knowledge in and of disability.

Conclusion: 'And Seem a Saint, When Most I Play the Devil'

Kings are killers. When disability studies takes Richard III as its standard-bearer, it models itself after a murderer. But rare is this color and disability studies, I think, who makes this choice consciously. In fact, one reading often repeated in the discipline is that a disability is wrongly seen as a symbol of evil. Disability is not a mark set on the forehead of Kane to warn off any one who would approach him. The problem with using Richard A standard-bearer for disability studies is that it comes at the cost of ignoring Richard's villainy. Richard is, after all, evil with a Vengeance. What leads the field to ignore the fact that Richard is truly malevolent? Why choose him as a standard-bearer? The answer comes, I suggest, from the underline desire and disability studies, especially in literary criticism, to embrace standard-bearers who represent power. One of the primary goals of disability studies is to empower people with disabilities. Richard fits the bill: he is visibly disabled and has no power, but will fight to obtain it.

Consider McRuer's choice of Richard to emblemize crip theory. McRuer diagnoses Richard as a vengeful narcissist his disability makes him evil, but this diagnosis does not prevent McRuer from naming the crip king at his standard-bearer in the battle to defeat the alliance between compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness: 'Richard sexy and queer – in and through the deformity that has made him [end page 451] evil' – sneers at 'the unnatural (and always doomed) union of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness.' The social model explains not that disabling environments make disabled people evil but that representations of disability attached to particular individuals based on the shape of their environment. McRuer turns the social model on its head, ignoring that it was designed to prevent disability from being named as the cause of moral failure. It is as if Richard and compulsory able-bodiedness represent evil twins whose battle results not in a victory for a 'positive substantive authentic *alternative to able-bodiedness*' – the phrase with which McRuer rejects disability studies as a failed liberalism – but in a victory for a sexy and queer alternative to able-bodiedness based on the celebration of disability as power.

Many critics in disability studies are eager to embrace a standard-bearer who suggests that power lies within the grasp of disabled people. The dominant interpretations in the field tends to discover a figure whose disability provides a model for the future empowerment of disabled people or who represents disability as the key to a new and better world. Neither Falstaff nor Ophelia offers support for this view. They represent the weak and the disabled, their tools belong to the disenfranchised, and they struggle less in the pursuit of power than against it. To make matters worse neither one succeeds. In fact neither one survives. They are both destroyed by someone like Richard.

The last fifty years have seen one identity group after another make demands for rights and social justice. Critics have attacked identity politics as selfish and power-hungry, I think wrongly, claiming that identity groups fail when they think of themselves to the exclusion of others. But this argument is not my concern here. My concern is to rethink the role played by power, particularly the tenet that names power as the ambition of disability studies. First, given its similarity to ability, empowerment represents a strange ambition for disability studies. Second and more crucial, the pursuit of power places limits on the self-representation of disability studies. Can disability as a critical concept survive if the disability community does not have the power to bring about positive changes in its status? How should disability studies respond to failures to gain power? For example, whatever Falstaff's power to masquerade, to pass as able-bodied, and to con power, it is clear in the end that power wins. Hal becomes king and Falstaff is banned from court, eventually to die without reconciliation. This example teaches disability studies that as much as we struggle, state power may be stronger than we are; no matter how many Heroes rise up, the powerful will likely cast them into the dirt. Does the pursuit of power require that disability studies ignore Falstaff, Ophelia, and others like them?

Perhaps knowledge might replace power at the goal of disability interpretation. This tenet, as figured by Falstaff and Ophelia, conceives of disability as embodied knowledge, resulting in several key changes. First, the identification of people with disabilities no longer derives solely from the physical or mental properties of their bodies. Second, disability identity is not the unique product of a disabling environment. Third, people are not recognized as disabled apart from their self-knowledge. Rather, the [end page 452] identity of disabled people presents itself as the awareness of a complex embodiment involving the reciprocal transformation between the body and its environment – a reciprocity that provides for change in each term within an otherwise constant equation, the content of which is embodied and thus known in and as the body. The disabled know themselves and others as disabled based on the possession and use of embodied knowledge. They may use their knowledge to survive,

making themselves invisible and visible, or they may pursue social change. Whether acting on a small or large scale, disabled people reveal themselves not by hoarding power but by creating new knowledge and sharing it.

Coda

The replacement of Richard invites new tenets, demands the revision of others, maintains some, and eliminates others. Here are six tenets that result from thinking about Falstaff and Ophelia as standard bearers of a differently disabled disability studies informed by the theory of complex embodiment:

1. Disability is a positive, robust, and critical identity.
2. Disability presents as embodied knowledge involving a reciprocal transformation between body and environment.
3. Disabled people identify themselves by the use of knowledge, gained through the experience of complex embodiment, in acts of passing, masquerade, or social critique.
4. Disabled people demonstrate self-consciousness when they make use of embodied knowledge.
5. Disabled people may use to their own advantage the misrepresentations of disability by which they are put at risk of violence and social exclusion, especially with respect to religious, moral, and social prejudices about disability.
6. Disability, sex-gender, and sexuality exist in critical reciprocity of component parts of each other, with certain specific and enduring configurations standing out among others: for example, femininity and mental disability are co-constitutive in sexist society.

[end page 453]