

# from Lindsey Row-Heyveld *Dissembling Disability in Early Modern English Drama*

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## Desiring Dissembled Disability

The tradition's focus on audience raises an important but difficult question: *Why* did audiences enjoy seeing able-bodied characters counterfeit disability so much? The popularity of the counterfeit-disability trope combined with its intense focus on audience requires at least speculative answers. In many ways, I see this whole volume as an attempt to answer that question. Certainly dissembled disability flourished on the stage because of the concerns about sturdy beggars that proliferated before and during the early modern era and because of the literary appeal and theatrical potential that the tradition offered to playwrights – among the many explanations offered herein. But I also do not want to underestimate the sheer *love* playgoers had for watching able-bodied characters counterfeit disability, nor do I want to assume that the answers offered in this book fully account for that love.

Audiences devoured this guy's generally and the early modern theater, and scholars largely described its popularity to disguise's ability to burst the boundaries of identity. In an extremely hierarchical culture and in an era of increasingly strict imposition of identity markers, disguise plots offered "a spectacle of transformation that suggested liberating protean possibilities, and... contradicted all that [early modern English people were] insistently told about the fixity of identity." Similarly, early modern England – and London, in particular – was becoming a location of escalating anonymity, where people could live detached from the communities and relationships that had previously conferred identity, thus making questions of selfhood more present and pressing. If we take seriously the possibility that early modern people enjoyed seeing the rigidity of identity relax or subverted, we must also take seriously the possibility of desire: People wanted to be less fixed and their identities (even if only as a fantasy) and they wanted to partake in other identities (even those regarded as inferior or dangerous). On stage and in *Disguise*, men became women and women became men, nobility became peasants, white people became Indians, Moors, Gypsies, and the like. Scholars have frequently discussed what these particular identities could give their performers, and while these disguises certainly convert specific benefits on their adopters, we [end page 213] cannot dismiss the possibility that disguisers wanted to *be* the people they pretended to be – and that audiences wanted to but vicariously share in that transformation, too.

Possibly, then, audiences wanted to see able-bodied characters take on the disguise of disability because they felt the constraints of ability/disability were too confining. Perhaps they wanted the chance to be a little more disabled, at least temporarily. Critical consensus agrees that early modern people felt restricted by their social position, even when that position was one of privilege, and that they sought to ease that restriction through the fantasy of disguise. If we are willing to acknowledge the desire of early modern people to break the boundaries of gender, race, and class identities through their use of disguise, I believe we must accept that this desire extended to disability, as well. Although the stage tradition of counterfeit disability ultimately enforced the boundaries between ability and

disability, it also reveals the early modern yearning to erase them. That said, this could have been (and certainly was in many cases) fetishistic, an eroticizing product fueled by novelty, taboo, even an early modern penchant for grotesquerie. Disguise did not necessarily imply a desire for permanent identity transformation; dissemblers almost always take on a temporary identity. Additionally, the subversion of their boundary-breaking is usually contained by conservative endings that returned dissemblers to their originally assigned identity and affirm the status quo. Of course, counterfeit disability happens in the context of fictional narrative and occurs within the licensed play space of the theater, further circumscribing its liberating potential. But these qualifications do not negate the desire for disability that pulses through the counterfeit-disability tradition.

Then, why disability? In what ways did it appeal to early modern people, even as a fantasy? The first and obvious answer to this is implicit and this volume: Perhaps early modern people saw disability (however incorrectly) as a freedom from work. Productive labor defined the parameters of disability during this era, and burgeoning Protestantism and burgeoning capitalism conspired to create an even greater pressure for people to participate and that labor. The authorized "idleness" of disability could have been seen as something of a relief. Even so, if this were the sole motivator for the early modern desire to take on disability, the stage tradition of counterfeit disability would likely not be so diverse and its methods and motivations. The tradition is not dominated by characters who feign disability to get out of work and/or acquire money without labor. Instead, in play after play, characters counterfeit impairment for wildly various reasons. **[end page 214]** While freedom from work may have driven some of disabilities appeal, it cannot account for all of it.

When characters counterfeit disability on stage, they acquire many advantages, and primary among them is invisibility. Disassembling characters are overlooked, taken for granted as agents, and that disregard grant them freedom. Because of the invisibility of disability, disguise characters can spy on others, cook up Revenge, tryst with their lover, and so on. If disability gives them freedom from anything, it gives them freedom from surveillance (both showcased and sent-up in *Bartholomew Fair*, Illustrated in Chap. 3). That freedom may have been especially valuable as increase anonymity invited increased scrutiny about identity during the early modern period. Of course, disabilities invisibility became Possible only through its paradoxical conspicuousness: On the stage, disability had to be highly visible, and the legal construction of disability in early modern England required real impairments to be signaled visually, as well. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explores the tension between how disability invites staring and, simultaneously, prompts rapid looking away. Citing anthropologist Robert Murphy, she notes that looking away does not actually equal visual anonymity. Instead, "looking away is an active denial of acknowledgement, rather than the tacit tipping of one's hat to an ordinary fellow citizen Express and simply not noticing one another. Looking away is for Murphy a deliberate obliteration of personhood." That obliteration of personhood may have contributed to the versatility of disability as a disguise, even at that impulse further marginalize real people with disabilities when its disguise proved useful on the stage. (The utility of this dehumanization and its consequences reveals itself in many of the place in this tradition, especially Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and *What You Will*.) The theater further extends the paradox of conspicuous/ invisible disability, since dissembling disability existed in the context of a spectacular stage performance. Disability's striking visual presence in the form of a virtuosic player's showy reactions on a platform above a crowd stands in sharp contrast to the place in assistance that disability grants its adopter freedom from notice. But disabilities paradoxical in/visibility comports with the appeal of anonymity that was desired even as it was feared.

Disability also granted early modern people freedom from the pressure to be healthy. Then, as now, the imperative to achieve perfect help could be incredibly impressive. Humoral medicine figured help as a mandatory and yet unattainable goal, and early modern understandings of the body linked physical well-being to moral fitness. The pressure to constantly [end page 215] strive for greater and greater health would have been impossible to sustain. Freedom from that demand must have held real appeal, even if it came at a cost. (However, the appeal may have been greater if those costs – particularly the physiological realities of the experience of impairment – were elided, as they often were in the counterfeit-disability tradition.) Augmenting this Allure is the way in which failing to be healthy could also remove one, at least somewhat, from the pressures of erotic, first, from strict moral codes, and from political obligations. The way disability excused one from the pressure to be healthy further explains why female characters find such appeal and dissembling disability. In addition to facilitating renegotiation of subject position as – argue in Chap. 4 – occurs in the plays *Friar Em* and *The Pilgrim*, disability's total exclusion from early modern standards of health may have been particularly freeing to women already largely barred from reaching that goal.

Disability also meant freedom from the charitable imperative. As I have demonstrated here, the burden of giving – and giving correctly in early modern England weighed heavy. Citizens had to walk a fine line between fulfilling their Christian duty of almsgiving and fulfilling their civic responsibility to follow the laws and discourage sturdy beggars (an obligation that was clearly felt intensely, whether or not sturdy beggars were really a threat in early modern England). What if disability appeal to Citizens, not because they were looking for a “free ride,” but because it offered relief from the stress of negotiating charity? Of course, if this is the case, the very tradition that allowed playgoers to indulge and the release from the charitable imperative through the fantasy of disability also actually freed them from the same imperative by insisting that all disability was dubious and suggesting that almsgiving be abandoned.

Disability may also have appealed to early modern people, not only in terms of what it freed 1 from, but also in terms of what it could give. Specifically, disability could confer knowledge. Disability meant new physical Sensations and somatic practices. It could also give insight about other people's experiences of life in their unique bodies. Disability could grant empathy; as I affirm in Chap. 1, This is certainly *King Lear's* thesis about disability. Perhaps early modern people desired disability because they wanted, like Gloucester, to “see...feelingly.” Further oh, unlike most racialized or gendered identities, disability was a subject position that anyone could experience at any time. The knowledge that counterfeit disability conferred may have been less about altruistic understanding than personal preparation: practice for your own future. Hurley modern impulses [end page 216] to meditate on and prepare for desk seemed of a piece with this possibility.

Disability also offers other types of knowledge, especially Innovative strategic thinking, as people with disabilities develop survival skills for navigating a world not adapted to accommodate them. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has argued persuasively for the advantages of “misfitting” in the world. She describes the way disability disrupts what she terms “material and visual anonymity” and instead fosters resourcefulness, resilience, and, especially, “subjugated knowledges from which an oppositional consciousness and politicized identity might arise.” The Cripple in *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* embodies this misfitting, as his disability seems to facilitate his ingenious strategies for various successes and to foster his attentiveness to the injustice he and others face. *Richard III* demonstrates darker but no less persuasive evidence that disability could enable an array of experiential knowledge and talents – a different kind of “politicized identity” – that equip Richard to maneuver through a complicated world.

All of these possibilities require further exploration, but all of them also strongly implied that the appeal of the counterfeit-disability tradition sprang from playgoers' desire to see the barriers between the able-bodied and the disabled blurred. At the same time, the tradition clearly worked to establish and strengthen those boundaries. Early modern people, of course, may have wanted both. Audiences are not monolithic; individuals are not without contradiction. I hope that my speculations here inaugurate greater investigation into the complicated responses to the non-standard body revealed by early modern counterfeit-disability narratives. But the question of dissembled disability's appeal at this crucial moment and its actual development and cultural evolution does more than invite further research into early modern disability: It demands a consideration at the counterfeit-disability trope in the twenty-first century, where it still flourishes.