

## [Oates on Hobgood, 'Beholding Disability in Renaissance England'](#)

Review published on Sunday, September 25, 2022

**Allison P. Hobgood.** *Beholding Disability in Renaissance England*. Corporealities: Discourses of Disability Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. 282 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-13236-2.

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**Printable Version:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57108>

Allison P. Hobgood is one of the leading figures in early modern disability studies. An English literature specialist, she coedited an important collection of essays with David Houston Wood, *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* (2013) following their work on “disabled Shakespeares” in *Disability Studies Quarterly* (2009). Her work has forged new paths for early modernists to follow, drawing on a wide range of literary texts to examine representations of disability and impairment, and her latest monograph, *Beholding Disability in Renaissance England*, is as innovative as expected.

If Hobgood has a thesis running through this monograph, it is the notion of what she describes as “crip-time.” Hobgood suggests that by focusing on disability in Renaissance texts we can collapse barriers between us and the past, while at the same time gain new perspectives on both historical and contemporary perceptions of the disabled body. Infusing her work with the language of activism, Hobgood seeks to unsettle us by asking us to look afresh at familiar texts and to pose new questions to less well-known ones.

Most simply, this is the application of contemporary discussions in disability studies (for example, “disability gain”) to the analysis of historical texts. Hobgood makes an impassioned argument that this is no anachronism. Initially I, a historian, was resistant to this method but found myself increasingly convinced by her approach and enjoying the insights it brings. As Hobgood writes, modern ideas of ability and impairment “can make the weight of the past more visible” (p. 2). Renaissance writers did not use phrases like “disability gain” or “ableism” nor did they use many of the concepts we employ to understand the past, particularly in the field of disability studies. And as other authors, for example, Elizabeth Bearden and Essaka Joshua, have shown, the language of critical disability studies is largely a modern invention.

Hobgood roots her discussion of early modern literature in a wider conversation in disability cultural studies. She also makes it clear that her analysis of plays and poems has much to say to scholars beyond the confines of disability studies. As she notes in the introduction, impaired bodies and minds were used to construct early modern perceptions of normalcy. Furthermore, her observations on a range of texts—from Shakespeare’s *Richard III* to Andrew Marvell’s poetry—add depth and nuance to the existing analytical literature.

It is, however, her contribution to histories of disability that is clearest. In her nuanced and thoughtful introduction, Hobgood briskly dismisses the idea that premodern Europe was some sort of utopia for disabled people. Instead, she argues that, while physical or mental impairment may have been “unexceptional,” it does not mean that disability did not exist in Renaissance Europe. Rather, she argues that early modern texts were rich with physical and mental difference and that the body was an important battleground. Hobgood also makes it clear, however, that she is not interested in a history of disability as a history of oppression but as a way into understanding both the past and present. Echoing Tobias Siebers’s work, Hobgood states that her aim is to foreground “knowledge [rather than] power as the goal of disability interpretation” (p. 11).

Hobgood examines early modern texts through some of the ideas and approaches developed by academics working more broadly in disability studies, including disability gain, theories of prosthesis, sexualities, and artistic production. She begins by looking more generally at early modern ideologies of normal, using Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar* as an initial focus. Caesar’s epilepsy, as portrayed in the play, allows Hobgood to discuss two competing views of disability in this period: firstly that impairment was evidence of sinfulness, and secondly, that it was a scientific understanding of body-mind difference. Hobgood argues that although apparently at odds, both views were current in the Renaissance period and were often held simultaneously. Drawing on a wider range of texts—from Shakespeare’s other plays to medical works—Hobgood shows that a proto-medical model of disability was emerging during the sixteenth century, but rather than challenging moral or theological views of impairment, it worked alongside them.

Perhaps the most rewarding chapter is Hobgood’s discussion of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. Hobgood, a stalwart of any discussion of disability literature, brings a fresh and interesting perspective to her discussion of the play, the king, and his reputation. Here, she employs ideas of “disabled gain” and incorporates ideas about the importance of the material and physical experience of disability. She challenges the idea that *Richard III* is nothing more than a “trite emblem of the moral model of disability” (p. 49). Instead, she shows how Richard’s impairment can make him invisible to his detractors, allowing him to carry out his schemes—an example of disability gain. She also examines the physical body of Richard: as written in Shakespeare’s text, as performed on stage, and as discovered in his burial place in the English city of Leicester. Peter Dinklage’s performance of the main character in *Richard III* (2004/5) is discussed, with Hobgood arguing that this is an example of “crip time,” whereby we confront our own views of disability through this historic text.[1] The startling perspectives offered by contemporary ideas about disability—Hobgood also draws on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s ideas about the “gaze”—are most apparent here and most successful, perhaps because Richard III is such a familiar figure.[2]

In subsequent chapters, Hobgood takes on less familiar texts, but her insights are equally useful. She examines the devotional poetry of the metaphysical poet Richard Crashaw (ca. 1613-49). Originally a supporter of Laudian reforms in the Church of England, Crashaw pursued the beauty of holiness through his poems, which explored divine love. Hobgood shows how Crashaw’s writing about divine suffering celebrates the value of pain. As a result, his poetry challenged contemporary ideas about humaneness residing in an able body.

In chapter 4, Hobgood draws on Jason Farr’s recent work on desire, sexuality, and the disabled body. Over the last decade or so, various scholars have explored the intersection between the “crip” and

“queerness,” throwing into relief some of the assumptions underpinning academic writing, which Hobgood describes as ableist and heteronormative. Here is a great example of how disability studies offer a fresh perspective on texts that are not obviously about disability. After a thoughtful discussion of castration, particularly focusing on Marvell’s poem “On a Eunuch,” Hobgood addresses the poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. Using insights from AIDS studies, she demonstrates that illness and physical difference can be seen as desirable, focusing attention on “crip sexualities.”

The final chapter examines disability and artistic production, showing how the play *Looke About You* (1600) uses stuttering as a dramatic resource and a key plot point. In addition, dysfluent speech becomes almost musical as the stuttering of the main character changes the rhythm of the play. Hobgood locates this analysis in a broader discussion of speech and fluency in the premodern world, showing how important rhetorical success was in the largely oral society of Renaissance England.

*Beholding Disability in Renaissance England* is a bold and successful attempt to change our perspectives, bringing the lens of disability and crip studies to analysis of literary texts. It is foremost a study of fictions—on the page and stage—speaking to specialists in English literature, though grounded in a larger field of critical disability studies. As the title reminds us, this is not—nor is it intended to be—an account of disabled people’s lives in Renaissance England. Instead, Hobgood offers a nuanced and well-supported analysis of representations of disability and ability in early modern England. Her insights will be useful for historians addressing the lived experiences of disabled people and for literature specialists of all hues providing fresh perspectives on familiar texts. Throughout, this book suggests new ways to approach disability and body-mind difference in premodern Europe.

#### Notes

[1]. Dinklage has recently achieved a similar feat in his role as Cyrano Bergerac in the musical film *Cyrano*, released in 2021.

[2]. Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) has been lauded as a groundbreaking text.

**Citation:** Rosamund Oates. Review of Hobgood, Allison P., *Beholding Disability in Renaissance England*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. September, 2022. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57108>

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