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Wilson, Jeffrey R.
***Richard III's Bodies from Medieval England to Modernity*.**
Shakespeare and Disability History. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2022. Pp. 268 + 2 fig., 23 b/w ill. ISBN 9781439922675 (paperback) US$34.95.

Jeffrey R. Wilson's study involves close reading and a careful understanding of Shakespeare's Richard III's bodies, past, present, and future. The eponymous Shakespearean play, as Wilson begins, was the first work to make Richard into a "hunch-backed" figure, apparently a misprint in the second quarto for "bunch-backed," which is the form in the first quarto and the First Folio. Wilson summarizes well: "This book shows Richard's disability traveling through time into and away from Shakespeare's hands, on down to today" (1). For Wilson, *Richard III* mixes medieval English history, tragedy, villainy, and disability while he notes that Richard, like Falstaff, Shylock, Hamlet, Othello, and Caliban, has studies written about him and was played by Richard Burbage, David Garrick, Edmund Kean, and Laurence Olivier before they acted Hamlet (1–2). Wilson discusses the influence of *Richard III* from being, in 1749, the first Shakespearean play produced professionally in America and then performed in 1821 by an African American company to being an inspiration for *The House of Cards* (2). Shakespeare's Richard has a historical and disabled body then and now (2). Moreover, Wilson aptly characterizes his own method: "The book connects the question about textual meaning to the one about cultural importance" (2). That, in a nutshell, is the key to Wilson's book and underpins his contribution. Close reading or careful attention to the work is a key to scriptural and secular exegesis. Wandering too far from Shakespeare's words departs from the matter at hand. Poetry and literature have long been the focus of literary studies, and the study of Shakespeare's plays and poems, his dramatic and non-dramatic poetry, needs, generation after generation, the close reading or interpretation of the text or the performance for the plays.

Wilson argues that Shakespeare uses a tragic and an ironic mode that makes Richard's body open to interpretation, including his disability, and he sees the study of culture as employing Richard's disability as a way of telling the story of the encounter with the tragic in modern times, leading to a new approach that he calls "the 'anthropology of audience'" (3). Interpreting Richard's body is about the interpretation of interpretation (23). Wilson rightly points to E. M. W. Tillyard and his connection of Richard's deformity to the Tudor

myth, which he saw as the central matter of Shakespeare's history plays (25). Furthermore, Wilson appeals to the discovery of Richard's body in Leicester in 2012 and to his scoliosis but not kyphosis or being a hunch-back (26). This character, Wilson claims, under the rubric of a "figural paradigm," is significant and says: "Richard III is the central site of stigma in English literature" (29). Wilson examines various posthumous portraits of Richard (30–9). Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577) refer to Richard as a "monster" (40) and Thomas Legge's *Richardus Tertius* (1580) employs the diction of the monstrous in Latin, for instance, *monstrum nefandum* (41). For interpretation and reading, Wilson calls on Eric Auerbach's "figural realism," which, Wilson says, allows for a bridging between two historical events, something Tudor writers did through their "historical imagination" via the devices of rhetoric they used to represent Richard's behaviour and body (46). This "figural representation" went from the visual to verbal arts, across genres in drama, poetry, and prose (47). At V.i.215, as Wilson notes, Clifford brands Richard, as the Greeks would brand a slave, with these words "foul stigmatic," thereby stigmatizing this English king with a relatively new English word borrowed from ancient Greece (47).

This usage leads Wilson to discuss models of stigma in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy. The "stigmatic" points to a threefold sign: the essential moral character of a villain, the expression of this villainy in the murderous usurpation of the throne in the 1470s and 1480s, and the divine order that shows evil through deformity and a Providence that punishes vice and rewards virtue (49). From his suggestive textual analysis, Wilson finds his own figurative typology between then and now, concluding that Shakespeare's thought is like that of Erving Goffman, the eminent sociologist born in Mannville, a hamlet east of Edmonton, Alberta, who trained at the Universities of Toronto and Chicago. As Wilson points out, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1956; repr., New York: Doubleday, 1959), Goffman uses "a dramaturgical approach" between the actor and the social context in which audience and environment shape interaction as "performance" (69; see also Goffman 1959, 17, 240). Goffman's epigraph is from George Santayana on masks and faces, the gap between images and things, words and feelings. Although Goffman does not appeal to Shakespeare as explicitly as Freud does, he is connected to Shakespeare in Wilson's book. For Wilson, Shakespeare saw that the spiritual view of stigma and his own psychological view of it are faulty and so he "embraced a sociological model of stigma" (69). Wilson makes

significant points, for example, that stigma is related to Christianity, to the metaphysics and theology of spirit, and maintains that perhaps Shakespeare himself "took issue with the figural interpretation of Richard's deformity" (96). This observation leads Wilson to ask whether Shakespeare was for or against stigma (97), although I would add that Shakespeare's irony—as the Schlegels, Tieck, Solger, Kierkegaard explored—has him choosing no sides, what John Keats had called negative capability. Wilson discusses the aged Margaret to pursue his question (106). Is disability a sign or an embodiment of evil or is it a cause (107)? Some, like A. W. Schlegel, Tillyard, and several recent critics, came to recognize the interplay of the causal and figural understandings of deformity in the First Tetralogy (144). Wilson examines disability and interpretations of Shakespeare's interpretation of Richard's body (145) and, for example, discusses the 2018 play *richard III redux*, a performance about one woman with the same disability as Richard from the perspective of the disabled (190–1).

As an intellectual and cultural historian, literary scholar and writer who has long written on Shakespeare's history and history plays, including discussions of new historicism, cultural materialism, and other ways to interpret Shakespeare, I am interested in a number of the ideas Wilson explores, including his exploration of the "anthropology of audience" and "historical presentism" (193), the last of which is an oxymoron or tautology. History is, as the distinguished journal *Past & Present* indicates, then and now. Presentism is of a vanishing present that is soon past as it moves into the future, but it is not historical alone. Wilson's conclusion gives a clear account of the reception of Shakespeare and defines the key term "anthropology of audience," which "is an empirical approach to subjective literary experience" (206) and is an approach that allows for a better understanding of "one's own experience as a reader and as an inhabitant of the second nature of literature," the last observation in the book (207). As *Richard III* is a play, the first audience is in the playhouse followed by the readers of the various printed versions in Shakespeare's life and after his death. There is, I would add, a drama or theatre of meaning between Shakespeare and us, the audience then and now and to be.

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