



## Conclusion

*Disabled people don't have to play the villain. The  
Superhumans Return.*

—Channel 4, Advertisement for Channel 4's coverage of the Paralympic Games 2016, YouTube, last modified, November 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FKcmEXPnUw>.

“The Superhumans Return”—a provocative advertisement for the 2016 Paralympic Games by the British free-to-air television broadcasting network Channel 4—intentionally draws attention to and problematizes the still-dominant trope of the disabled villain. Still, it also unwittingly reifies another problematic stereotype: the “supercrip.”<sup>1</sup> The ad depicts five subjects: two artificial-limb users, a wheelchair user, a person with a congenital deformity of the arm, and a person of small stature—each of whom plays the role of a stereotypical melodramatic villain. This critical stance aligns the ad with the work of disability-studies scholars and activists such as Paul K. Longmore, Jenny Morris, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Ato Quayson, and David Roche, who critique the cultural trope of physical difference as a metaphor for evil and/or moral corruption.<sup>2</sup> Bringing a critical attitude to disability representation into popular consciousness is certainly encouraging. But in labelling Paralympic athletes “superhumans,” and by extending its advertising campaign for the

2012 Paralympic Games that used the same contentious branding, Channel 4 falls into a trap of undermining the complex humanity of Paralympic athletes through an overemphasis on their “overcoming-the-odds” backstories. This label presents disabled athletes as more than human, spectacular, even freakish. The *super* in “superhuman” derives from Latin, where the term is used chiefly with the sense “above, over” (of place) (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

It is certainly encouraging that athletes living with physical impairments are provided a popular and engagingly promoted public platform upon which to gain recognition for their achievements. Nonetheless, the very term “superhuman” weakens such a project by reinforcing the ableist tone that often inflects discussions about disabled sportspersons: “it’s amazing what s/he has achieved given *X*.” As Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe explain, “supercrip narratives may have a negative impact on the physical and social development of disabled individuals by reinforcing what could be termed ‘achievement syndrome’—the impaired are successful in spite of their disability.”<sup>3</sup> In an informative companion video (available on both Channel 4 website and YouTube), which accompanies the “Superhumans Return” advert, the disabled actors that star in the ad provide comments on current attitudes to physical difference, drawing in particular on their experience of applying for acting roles in film and television.<sup>4</sup> The actors reveal how they often struggle to get roles that do not programmatically exploit their physical differences for narrative purposes. The film ends provocatively with one female actor stating, “Just because I’m 4 foot 6 and you’re not. We’re just still human beings. We’re still connected.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this empathetic statement is not matched by the ad itself, which replaces one limiting stereotype (the disabled villain) with another (the supercrip).

Clearly, representations of physical difference have moved on in various ways since the period that I have explored in *Prosthetic Body Parts in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*. But there remain overlaps between then and now. For instance, the trope of the prosthesis-using villain is evoked, a representational typecast that we have seen has deep historical roots, notwithstanding Victorian precursors such as Silas Wegg from Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865) and Jonathan Small from Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes novel *The Sign of Four* (1890).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the motif of the weaponized prosthetic body part is also redeployed. Reminiscent of Robocop, one male

artificial leg user is shown to have a cybernetic prosthesis that incorporates a holster for a pistol. As shown in Chap. 3, this icon remains popular in cultural depictions of prosthetic body parts, particularly as we move ever closer what some have called a “transhuman” age. We live in a time now when advertisements including “The Superhumans Return” are released to the public with the intent of challenging assumptions about what it means to be disabled or nondisabled. The physically different, often prostheticized body, is presented to us as a viable alternative to organic physical wholeness, which, though increasingly challenged, remains hegemonic. However, advances in the field of disability studies have placed the dominance of physical completeness under much-needed critical scrutiny.

This book has argued that narratives from the very period in which prostheses saw their most significant technological changes throw into question the cultural privileging of physical wholeness. Does such questioning suggest that the nineteenth century marked an era of progressive enlightenment? As my case studies show, representational tropes, including that of the beggar with wooden leg (explored in depth in Chap. 4) or the failing cosmetic prosthesis (investigated in detail in Chaps. 5 and 6), endured throughout the period. Specific historical and cultural factors, such as the 1860s fashion for false hair, informed specific manifestations of prosthesis tropes and yet many of the representations drew from previous depictions and often questioned the dominance of physical wholeness. What is true, however, is that the number of cultural and literary representations spiked around periods when these devices saw major innovation or increased circulation. For instance, even in Britain the 1860s saw an increase in mentions of the term “artificial leg” according to an “entire document” search of the ProQuest source *British Periodicals Online* (Collections I, II, and III).<sup>7</sup> This spike correlates with the developments in prosthesis manufacture and distribution to American Civil War amputees. A comparable search of *British Periodicals Online*, using the term “artificial eye,” also yields a peak in the 1860s.<sup>8</sup> This increase can be attributed to the presence in England of Parisian artificial-eye maker Auguste Boissonneau, whose enamel artificial eyes dominated the European market in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s.

Regarding the specific ways that the hegemony of wholeness was challenged by the prosthesis narratives, we have seen a variety of approaches. Chapter 3 revealed how representations of highly effective prostheses,

devices that could be used as weapons, and self-acting prosthetics provided challenges to the hegemonic concept of physical wholeness by presenting menacingly powerful and at times intelligent devices—non-human parts that threatened to usurp the organic whole. Chapter 4 explored prosthesis users who threatened to upset the cultural applecart by advancing their social positions. What was most transgressive about the stories explored in this chapter was the fact that the success that several of the prosthesis users achieved stemmed precisely from the conspicuousness of their artificial body parts rather than from their ability to enable their users to pass. Chapter 5 similarly showed how prostheses were sometimes imagined as desirable assets for a wide variety of reasons in nineteenth-century marriage plots. Paradoxes inherent in the social system that privileged wholeness were interrogated, as Chap. 6 has explained, by narratives that humorously depicted ageing prosthesis users. For many Victorian writers, the privileging of wholeness had brought about an army of aged prosthesis users, who provided substantial material for comic representations.

In conclusion, *Prosthetic Body Parts in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* adds to our understanding of the history of disability, the construction of normalcy, and the relationship between literature and science, technology, and medicine. The prosthetic has been popular as both a critical metaphor and a material artefact for scholarly inquiry during the past twenty years, but there remains much to be understood, especially about the longer literary history concerning this technology. My research provides part of the story, though several angles remain uncovered. How were literary representations of prosthesis affected by the First World War, the Second World War, and artistic movements of the twentieth century such as modernism? How does race affect representations of prosthesis users? How were prostheses treated in non-Anglophone literatures? Humans are not the only species to use prostheses. Today, a wide variety of non-human animals are fitted with prosthetic body parts for both cosmetic and compassionate reasons. What can be said about the cultural history of this phenomenon? David Wills brings to the fore the ontological complexity of the prosthetic when he writes: “[T]he writing of prosthesis ... is inevitably caught in a complex play of displacements; prosthesis being about nothing if not placement, displacement, replacement, standing, dislodging, substituting, setting, amputating, supplementing.”<sup>9</sup> I hope to have shown how the intricacy of the prosthetic is matched by its remarkable nineteenth-century cultural and literary history.

## NOTES

1. R. J. Berger describes supercrips as “those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible.” For Marie Myers Hardin and Brent Hardin, such a model involves presenting the disabled person as heroic due to his or her ability to perform feats normally considered impossible for people with disabilities or by virtue of the person living a “regular” life despite impairment. In Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe’s article, supercrip “implies a stereotyping process that requires an individual ‘to fight against his/her impairment’ in order to overcome it and achieve unlikely ‘success.’” R. J. Berger, “Disability and the Dedicated Wheelchair Athlete: Beyond the ‘Supercrip’ Critique,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 37, no. 6 (2008): 648; Marie Myers Hardin and Brent Hardin, “The ‘Supercrip’ in Sport Media: Wheelchair Athletes Discuss Hegemony’s Disabled Hero,” *Sociology of Sport Online* 7, no. 1 (2004): 5.3; Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe, “The (In)validity of Supercrip Representation of Paralympian Athletes,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 36, no. 2 (2012): 175.
2. Paul K. Longmore, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” in *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, ed. A. Ian Gartner (New York: Praeger, 1987); Jenny Morris, *Pride against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability* (London: The Women’s Press, 1996); David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); David Roche, “The Metaphor of Facial Disfigurement,” *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-roche/the-metaphor-of-facial-di\\_b\\_144949.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-roche/the-metaphor-of-facial-di_b_144949.html).
3. Silva and Howe, “The (In)validity,” 174.
4. Channel 4, “Meet the Cast: The Superhumans Return,” YouTube, last modified November 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGnHzFldPwY>.
5. Ibid.
6. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Everyman, 2000); Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (London: Penguin, 2001).
7. ProQuest, *British Periodicals*, accessed July 5, 2018, <https://www.proquest.com/products-services/british-periodicals.html>.
8. Sixteen results are produced as opposed to seven in 1850–1859 and four in 1870–1879.
9. David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 9.

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