

Literary Disability Studies

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Disabling Romanticism

palgrave
macmillan

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Literary Disability Studies
ISBN 978-1-137-46063-9 ISBN 978-1-137-46064-6 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-46064-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016942478

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The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. London

In memory of Kathleen Willoughby 1917-2013

FOREWORD

This collection of essays represents a timely and crucial intervention in the field of Romantic studies, and studies of literature and culture more widely. Romanticism as either an aesthetic or ideology has traditionally been viewed as concerned with transcendence of the material through its concern with the creative imagination and its rejection of the somatic. Yet many Romantic-period writers experienced certain mental and bodily ‘conditions’ that we would conventionally accept today as forms of disability: Byron’s club foot; Coleridge’s mental depressions and addictions; Mary Robinson’s lower-body paralysis; Mary Lamb’s and John Clare’s psychiatric disabilities; and George Darley’s stutter, to name just a very few.

Furthermore, disability features in much of the writing of the Romantics as well, from Wordsworth’s notorious ‘idiot boy’ Johnny Foy to Mary Shelley’s creature in *Frankenstein*. The discourse of disability, articulated in various ways in the period—incapacity, illness, ugliness, deformity, monstrosity—is present almost everywhere, from picturesque aesthetics to the theorisations of the sublime of Edmund Burke. It is also present in the political discourse of the period. Who, after reading the essays in this collection, will ever read the opening lines of Percy Shelley’s ‘England in 1819’ with its vivid depiction of George III as an ‘old, mad, blind, despised and dying king’ in quite the same way?

The Romantic era was also a period in which Enlightenment epistemologies were problematised by cases of sensory ‘deprivation’: blindness, deafness, and other conditions. A nascent science of biology and comparative anatomy now turned its attention to bodily difference, attempting to explain these phenomena in the context of new, yet imperfect,

understandings of the processes of generation. We are reminded that Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley all had an active engagement with the medicine and natural philosophy of their time, the era just before ‘science’ and ‘scientists’ were so named. Reading and rereading these texts, both fictions and lives, against the grain of disability studies produces new insights and understandings. In fact, once we situate these writings within the context of the new and developing field of disability studies, we are confronted with an entirely new cultural landscape, that we now view as scholars highly sensitised to issues of disability. This encounter between disability and literary studies challenges us to rethink our established understandings of even the most familiar of Romantic texts.

The essays in this collection are informed by recent theoretical understandings of disability that problematise our very understandings of the dichotomy between disabled and non-disabled, encouraging us to move far beyond limited and conventional mis/understandings of embodiment, to appreciate more fully the creative and positive aspects of the many extraordinary diversely impaired and embodied subjects of Romantic-period writing.

Tom Shakespeare
Peter Kitson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the support of the Research Investment Fund at Edge Hill University, in helping to set up the Romanticism at Edge Hill research seminar, where Michael Bradshaw, Jeremy Davies, Essaka Joshua, and Christine Kenyon Jones have all presented aspects of their work in progress. Julia Miele Rodas would also like to thank Diana Paulin for inviting her to speak as part of the Allan K. Smith Visiting Scholars Series, hosted by the English Department at Trinity College in Hartford; the generosity and intellectual support of Dr Paulin and her colleagues were substantial contributing factors in the development and revision of her chapter.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
	Michael Bradshaw and Essaka Joshua	
2	Picturesque Aesthetics: Theorising Deformity in the Romantic Era	29
	Essaka Joshua	
3	Disability, Sympathy, and Encounter in Wordsworth's <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> (1798)	49
	Emily B. Stanback	
4	'Psychological Curiosit[ies]' from an 'Intellectual Giant': Coleridge, Disease, Disability, and Drugs	71
	Corey Goergen	
5	'In Mental as in Visual Darkness Lost': Southey's Songs for a Mad King	87
	David Chandler	
6	Mary Robinson's Paralysis and the Discourse of Disability	105
	William D. Brewer	

7	Blakean Wonder and the Unfallen Tharmas: Health, Wholeness, and Hierarchy in <i>The Four Zoas</i> Matt Lorenz	127
8	‘An Uneasy Mind in an Uneasy Body’: Byron, Disability, Authorship, and Biography Christine Kenyon Jones	147
9	Autistic Voice and Literary Architecture in Mary Shelley’s <i>Frankenstein</i> Julia Miele Rodas	169
10	A Hundred Tongues: George Darley’s Stammer Jeremy Davies	191
	Index	211

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