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Abstract

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Keywords

disability studies, queer theory, gothic, history of the novel, illness, disease, deafness, eighteenth-century British novel, Romantic novel

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Jason Farr. *Novel Bodies: Disability and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature*. Bucknell University Press, 2019. 194 pp., 3 illustrations. ISBN 978-1-68448-107-1

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With the publication of Jason Farr's *Novel Bodies: Disability and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature*, disability studies continues its rise to prominence in eighteenth-century studies. Building on early work by Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum and more recent work by Simon Dickie, Essaka Joshua, Chris Mounsey, Paul Kelleher, and Emily Stanback, *Novel Bodies* focuses on the intersections of deafness, deformity, chronic disease, illness, and queerness. This is an ambitious study that includes a wide range of eighteenth-century, gothic, and Romantic authors, including Horace Walpole, Eliza Haywood, Samuel Richardson, Sarah Scott, Tobias Smollett, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen. Across these texts, Farr argues that “marginal sexualities are often bound to impairment and that this affiliation helped to create the conditions for modern sexual categories to emerge” (2). Throughout, his arguments are compelling, well written, and insightful.

Farr begins by historicizing the modern idea of *disability* and connecting it to the eighteenth-century concept of *deformity*, “a commodious term that encompasses various kinds of physical deviation from the status quo” (2). Throughout the introduction, Farr carefully defines terms like *complex embodiment*, *disability*, *deformity*, *bodily variability*, and *crip theory*. This attention to the nuance of language creates a book that will appeal to people familiar with disability studies and queer theory but that will also be accessible to readers less familiar with those fields.

In his readings, Farr calls attention “to both the physical and the social facets of embodiment, arguing for a relational approach to disability, whose meaning changes according to historical and geographic contexts” (3). Within these shifting contexts, Farr demonstrates how authors from varying backgrounds and ideologies “employ disability and queerness in their fiction to critique and rework the social fabric—to imagine ‘novel’ social orders that rearrange widespread assumptions, principles, and social practices” (3). Farr decodes John Locke’s ableism, arguing that he “neglects to take into account how people with sensory impairments figure into the educational process he meticulously outlines” (5). By reinforcing an assumed connection between the impaired body and mind, “Locke expels the physically and intellectually impaired” from education and the attainment of happiness (6).

Like other scholars in the field, Farr reads disability as fluid: “one may become disabled at any point, temporarily or permanently, and the likelihood of one’s becoming impaired only increases as one ages” (11). However, unlike most work in disability studies, he traces the idea that “disability is tinged with sexual or gender transgression” to Francis Bacon’s 1612 essay *Of Deformity* (11). For Farr, Bacon’s essay is “a touchstone for the long history of disabled and queer association, in that it establishes involuntary disfigurement as antecedent to queer ways of being that are still contained within dominant social and political paradigms” (12). By centering bodily and sexual difference in their narratives, Farr argues, “novelists of the eighteenth century envision reform” (13).

Farr applies this framework to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and shows that, despite George Haggerty's influential work, Walpole's novel still has much to say. Analyzing Conrad's death early in the novel, Farr reads this "homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition" (15) as "the queer, disabled catalyst of the plot, and by extension, of the early British gothic genre" (16). Throughout this section, Farr emphasizes how Walpole pathologizes Manfred's ableism and critiques the degree to which the system of primogeniture depends on healthy male heirs (17). Farr concludes by linking libertinism to disability in John Wilmot's poetry and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and maintains that the novel form depends on "configurations of queer, disabled bodies" (24).

Chapter one explores representations of Duncan Campbell, a real-life deaf man. For Farr, the various accounts of Campbell "mark a watershed moment in British deaf cultural history due to their extended engagement with the biography of a profoundly deaf character who was both literate and heroic" (37). Throughout this lengthy chapter, Farr focuses on "the period's deeply embedded *audism*—a social system in which deaf people are oppressed due to the primacy of vocal interaction" (37). *The History of the Life and Adventures of Mr. Duncan Campbell* establishes Campbell's "cosmic queerness," his "ostensible ability to tap into the unknown, his birth among the pygmies of Lapland, and his communication skillset that flies in the face of accepted audist wisdom," which "set him apart as an otherworldly entity" (39). Farr situates these renderings within the eighteenth-century fascination with deaf people and cites John Bulwer's 1640s texts on gesture and deaf education as illuminating the "unique sociability of deaf people" and "the queer orientation of deaf soundscapes" (47). Farr contends that Eliza Haywood's *A Spy on the Conjuror* normalizes Campbell's sexuality by transforming him into "a source of paternalistic masculine authority—a mature family man who is married with children" (55). In the process, Haywood also normalizes deafness, showing that "deafness might be viewed not as a severe impediment to happiness but as a natural course of life" (57). *The Secret Memoirs of the Late Mr. Duncan Campbell* portrays Campbell as a man of sensibility and highlights his epileptic loss of bodily control. Across these three texts, Farr shows how "Campbell's gender and sexuality oscillate between hypermasculinity, standard manhood, cosmic queerness, and womanish delicacy" (64). Farr's analysis is strengthened by attention to visual rhetoric that accompanied texts on both deafness and Campbell.

Chapter two reads the intersections of disability and sexuality in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and Sarah Scott's novels. In *Pamela*, Farr argues that "Mrs. Jewkes, as disabled, queer version of narrative prosthesis, represents that which must be eradicated: the base designs of the libertine" (78). Having established Richardson's use of Mrs. Jewkes as the double of Mr. B, who reforms her aggressive sexuality as he changes his behavior, Farr turns to Sarah Scott's novels, which he interprets as rewritings of *Pamela*. Farr examines depictions of disability, aging, and queerness in *A Journey through Every Stage of Life*, *Millenium Hall*, and *The History of Sir George Ellison* and concludes that "Scott redeems women, the queer, the disabled, and the deformed inasmuch as they enjoy the classed privilege which enables them to possess the requisite education. Those that live in servitude or in slavery, however, are dependent upon their masters for nourishment and the civilizing influences of religion and education" (98). This extended comparison is deftly handled and surprisingly effective.

Chapter three argues that Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* revises the comedy genre by tethering a wide range of "illness and disability to courtship irregularity" (105). This chapter draws out the paradox of Bath, a place known for uniting couples that is also a famed destination for people with chronic illness and disability (111). Farr reads Matthew Bramble as an aging libertine and shows how Smollett responds to Richard Steele's early eighteenth-century "proposition for the organization of ugly clubs" where "variably-embodied or 'ugly' men gathered together regularly in fellowship to ridicule each other and to make light of their bodies and visages" (117). Farr argues that "Bramble uncovers the failures of ugly clubs to root out despondence" among the aged and disabled (118). This chapter advances Farr's larger argument—and that argument is persuasive throughout.

Chapter four explores "queer ocular relations" in Frances Burney's *Camilla* and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*—relations in which "same-sex desiring and gender nonconforming subjects find one another in environments that are hostile to their very existence" (132). The chapter moves discussions of the gaze beyond "the violence of the male, panoptical, and clinical gazes" to show that women used the gaze to "sidestep or undermine narrow domestic standards" (133). Farr's reading of Lady Delacour and Harriet Freke's "starer and staree" relationship as sapphic (149) and his simultaneous recognition that Harriet Freke is both transgender and disabled stands out and offers a model for both/and queer readings that voice instead of erase lived trans experience during the period. Farr's note that "Female husbands and mollies offer eighteenth-century examples of transgender embodiment" (163) builds on discussions of mollies as transwomen from 2017's *TransGothic in Literature and Culture* and anticipates the 2020 publication of Jen Manion's *Female Husbands: A Trans History*. Farr's last section, a coda on Jane Austen's *Sanditon*, convincingly argues that the novel's "ill and queer bodies" "confound and rework the standard heterosexual romance plot for which Austen is known" (166).

While readers of this journal may find chapters two and four—the chapters that highlight female experience—most noteworthy, chapters three, four, and the coda will appeal to both eighteenth-century scholars and Romanticists working on sensibility and the domestic novel. As the eighteenth century becomes ever longer, incorporating Romantic novels, and Romanticism increasingly stretches backward to 1780 (some Romanticists say 1750), it becomes harder to tell which Romantic studies are relevant to eighteenth-century studies and vice versa. That difficulty acknowledged, it would have been nice to see chapter four engage with Andrew Elfenbein's *Romantic Genius*. He argues that in the late eighteenth century, genius and queerness were often conflated and that genius allowed people whose gender or health might otherwise have prevented them from entering the literary marketplace to do so: "Artists most invested in appearing as geniuses were not the men dominating London's literary scene. Instead, they were the outsiders for reasons of gender, education, nationality, and even health. Genius gave them an opening into what seemed the hitherto closed system of literary production" (18). Given Farr's intersectional reading of gender and health in *Camilla* and his claim that Eugenia's intellect is tied to her disability and larger eighteenth-century discourses of genius (138-140), this seems like a connection that might have been explored more fully.

That minor point aside, this is an important first book that will establish Farr as a major voice in queer and disability studies. Across the manuscript, each chapter is firmly connected to those that precede and follow it. In *Novel Bodies*, Farr illustrates the centrality of queerness, disease,

illness, and impairment to the history of the British novel, the gothic novel, and the long eighteenth century more generally; beyond that, he advances queer studies in significant and compelling ways by advocating inclusive, intersectional analysis.