Shakespeare’s *Richard III* was the first text to describe Richard as “hunchbacked,” also the first instance of that word in English.¹ Earlier writers had addressed Richard’s physical disability, but Shakespeare was the first to make him into an almost inhuman monster. The “hunch” belongs to Shakespeare more than Richard. But “hunch-backed” wasn’t Shakespeare’s word. It was a misprint in the second quarto of *Richard III* for Shakespeare’s “bunch-backed,” the common early-modern word in the first quarto and first folio.² The “hunch” belongs to us, not Shakespeare—his audience, not the author. It’s our “hunch” that we see as his, interpretation incorporated into text, indicating the swirl of objective reality and subjective response that always attends Richard III’s body.

This book shows Richard’s disability traveling through time into and away from Shakespeare’s hands, on down to today. While mired in details of medieval English history, *Richard III* and its configuration of disability, villainy, and tragedy still speak to us in the twenty-first century with a surprising urgency. “Foremost among the standard-bearers of Disability Studies is Shakespeare’s Richard III,” as Tobin Siebers noted just before his death in 2015.³ Richard’s body was international front-page news in 2012 when his skeleton was discovered.⁴ He’s in that echelon of Shakespearean characters—Shylock, Falstaff, Hamlet, Othello, Caliban—who have entire books written about them.⁵ The four greatest Shakespearean actors of the past four centuries—Richard Burbage, David Garrick, Edmund Kean, Laurence
Olivier—all played Richard before Hamlet. The first Shakespeare play professionally staged in America? *Richard III*, in 1749. The first play performed by an African American acting company? *Richard III*, in 1821. Documentaries are made about the challenge and importance of *Richard III*. It was Shakespeare’s second-most popular play in quarto and the most performed history play in both the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. It inspired the recent Netflix hit *House of Cards* and drew comparisons to the rise of Donald Trump in the United States.

James Siemon, a recent editor, says that *Richard III* is Janus-faced, pointing from the early-modern age back to its medieval past but also forward to a modern future, “socially topical both to Shakespeare’s London, and, paradoxically, to subsequent social formations even today.” Katherine Schaap Williams similarly notes “Richard’s double-facing presence in the narrative of disability theory,” the character cited as evidence both for and against the presence of “disability” in the early-modern age. Thus, both literary scholars looking at the play and disability scholars looking at the character sense a multi-temporality. How is Richard III always so historical and so current? Why are issues related to medieval disability so relevant to modern life? Why is Shakespeare’s play so persistent? Why do we care so much about Richard III? What is the *significance* of his body—not only its *meaning* in Shakespeare’s text (what it signifies) but also its *importance* as a cultural touchstone in England and beyond (why it is significant)?

This book connects the question about textual meaning to the one about cultural importance. I argue that Shakespeare’s ironic representation of Richard’s disability—which destabilizes meaning by dramatizing different meanings being made, deferring meaning to different audiences interpreting disability from different perspectives—creates a flexible conceptual space with a huge gravitational pull: some of our most consequential theories of modern aesthetics, theology, philosophy, ethics, psychology, sociology, historiography, science, medicine, and politics have been brought into attempts to understand Richard’s body. In a quintessentially Shakespearean exchange, the playwright’s dramatic mode, both tragic and ironic, calls upon some of life’s biggest questions (because it is tragic) but defers answers to the audience (because it is ironic), leaving Richard’s body open to interpretation in different ages embracing different attitudes toward stigma. The changing meaning of disability repeatedly recontextualized through shifting perspectives and circumstances in Shakespeare’s first tetralogy has thus prompted and sustained more than four hundred years of changing interpretations of Richard, his body, his behavior, and his status as either the villain or the victim of Tudor
history. Shakespeare’s irony makes possible a cultural study using Richard’s disability to tell the story of our encounter with tragedy in modernity. The conclusion to this book theorizes this multi-century story into a new approach to Shakespearean phenomena widely interpreted, debated, and adapted in modern culture, called the “anthropology of audience,” which marries the historicism and presentism currently at odds in Shakespeare studies.

I. Disability, Monstrosity, and Meaning

Most start by interpreting Richard with their eyes. His body shows what we’ve been trained to see. Yet so much interpretation is already at work in him. The actor has decided how to embody the character. The director has amended the text. The editor has glossed Richard’s opening soliloquy. The scholar has considered centuries of interpretation. Our first encounter with Richard’s body is less about what we think than what we perceive based on what is shown to us. History does not display changing interpretations of Richard’s body as much as it shows different bodies built by different historically situated people and placed in different dramatic contexts that create different meanings. So fundamentally visual, Richard’s body is now an opportunity for what Alice Wong calls “disability visibility”—“creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture”—in history.13

Everyone at the Elizabethan theater must’ve known when Richard (Burbage) first appeared on stage—dressed how? walking how? “deformed” how?—that his body called for interpretation. Disabled, alone, framed by the stage, on display, emblematic, Richard’s first appearance invokes the posters announcing “monstrous” births in Elizabethan England—one term they used for physical disability.14 There are usually four parts: a title advertising something as true and mysterious; a visual representation, not unlike a Shakespearean performance; a prose description of the facts, akin to Shakespeare’s text; and a poetic interpretation of meaning, what audiences do when making sense of Shakespeare (see Figure I.1). Something is “monstrous, monstrous,” according to two characters in Richard III, “when men are unprepared and look not for it” (3.2.62–63). From the Latin monere, “to warn,” and monstrare, “to show,” monstrosity is unexpected, difficult to classify, hyper-significant, and always a warning.15 As Anna Dunthorne writes, “Monster literature was part of a culture of reading and looking.”16 Monstrosity activates hermeneutics—reflection on interpretation. The stakes were always high, Alan W. Bates explains: “The early modern reader was concerned not simply with the occurrence of monstrous births but with their significance, in how they fitted
Interpreting monstrosity revealed one’s worldview, its assumptions and commitments—theological, scientific, philosophical, ethical. Monstrosity signals the need for interpretation and, to quote Lindsey Row-Heyveld, “disability in early modern England invited epistemological crisis.”

While “Renaissance writers frequently used monstrosity to imagine what we now call disability,” Elizabeth B. Bearden cautions that the two discourses are not the same—“overlapping, but not coterminous,” in the judgment of...
Richard H. Godden and Asa Simon Mittman. Monstrosity shows a culture looking at an individual; disability prioritizes the individual’s experience with their body and cultural attitudes about it. As both man and myth—a disabled person of medieval England whose life as king was extensively recorded before, a century later, he was made into a monster by his nation’s most important artist—Richard III will always be central to English disability history.

The play Richard III is no less “monstrous” than its title character. Both thematize the unexpected, the need for interpretation, multiple layers of meaning. The text revels in its own monstrosity from its opening lines. “Now is the winter of our discontent,” Richard says (1.1.1), establishing discontent as England’s current condition. But once our eyes scan down to the next line, or after a pause by the actor playing Richard, we learn that this winter is “Made glorious summer by this son of York” (1.1.2). Anticipating what David Houston Wood calls “the play’s entwined representation of time, narrative, and disability,” this elliptical opening needs an approach that experiences literature in time. Consider the kind theorized by Stanley Fish as “reader response,” which, though now out of fashion, is the origin of the audience-oriented approach to Shakespeare developed in this book, called the “anthropology of audience.” Reader-response criticism works well for drama because performance moves at the speed of life: “The basis of the method is a consideration of the temporal flow of the reading experience, and it is assumed that the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance.” As we read or see a play, understanding is continually formed and reformed as additional information modifies the earlier sense of things, whether on the level of sentence or text as a whole. The first line of Richard III would have “is” be the intransitive main verb of the sentence, equating the subject (“now”) and predicate (“winter”): “Now is the winter of our discontent.” But the second line reveals that “is” is actually an auxiliary verb in the passive construction “is made,” so the subject from the initial reading (“now”) must be made into an adverb. Where we previously thought that “the winter of our discontent is now,” we now understand that “the winter of our discontent is now made glorious summer.” The climate in England is no longer winter; it’s now summer. The current condition is not discontent; it’s glory. With the opening of Richard III, Shakespeare pulled a Bill Clinton: “It depends upon what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.”

That grammatical amorphousness is a warning of multiple meanings lurking in the play that follows. In the second line, it’s the “son of York,”
Richard’s brother, the newly crowned King Edward IV, who has shifted his family’s fortunes, a pun on the “sun” that turns darkness to light, winter to summer. A pun is a mutation open to divination: “sun” means both “male child” and “shining star.” And Richard says one thing but means another. He’s claiming to have bid farewell to discontent; he hasn’t. He’s acutely disturbed, as he soon says. An amalgamation of multiple meanings, the second line of the play shows mutations that occur when translating words into ideas and considering meaning in context.

Richard’s opening address has body imagery in fifteen of the next twenty-one lines. He inspects the “brows” of the Yorks (1.1.5) and their “bruisèd arms” (1.1.6), while Richard’s lusty brother Edward now occupies “a lady’s chamber” (1.1.12), where they enjoy the “pleasing of a lute” (1.1.13). I’m working toward a statement of the meaning of Richard’s opening soliloquy—monstrosity calls for meaning-making—but let’s start small with the meaning of “chamber” and “lute.” Yes, “a room inside a building” and “a stringed instrument with a neck,” but clearly “chamber” and “lute” signal sexual organs as well. Shakespeare used “chamber” and “lute” instead of anatomically explicit terms to offer audiences the not-unpleasant experience of making dirty little sense of the metaphors. These metaphors require an interpretive act, like monstrosity, and a statement of the meaning of “chamber” and “lute” must attend to that act of making sense.

I’m thinking about syntax (“is”), wordplay (“son”), and metaphor (“chamber” and “lute”) in terms of monstrosity because Shakespeare made “deformity” the content that originates the dramatic action in Richard III and the form that organizes the language of the play. Richard’s opening “descant on [his] own deformity” (1.1.27) begins with a series of ill-proportioned pentameter lines that resist any rhythm at all (try reading these lines without stumbling over your own breathlessness around the word “breathing”):

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking glass;
I, that am rudely stamped and want love’s majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them (1.1.14–23)
In the final line, after the opening iamb (“That dogs”), the two trochees (“bark at me as”) destroy any sense of rhythm, which is impossible to resume when the iambic meter returns in the final two feet (“I halt by them”). Richard’s metrical feet “halt” like his actual feet. Deformity is both content and form: “deformed” might be two syllables, or three; “unfinished” two, or three, or four. Symbolizing ideas in language, Shakespeare raised monstrosity to the level of theme. The play runs everything through Richard’s body via Shakespeare’s obsessive imagery of deformity, even when not in reference to Richard. Not only the character Richard III but also the play Richard III is deformed: history told as tragedy, with chunks of comedy and romance. It’s prodigiously long, with humps and bumps that fuse together disparate concepts—including a hero who is a villain—asking us to redefine our ideas of literary coherence and possibility. The play violates our expectations, calls for interpretation, and serves as a warning of dangerous things to come, epitomizing Bearden’s argument that “experimental genres that diverge from neoclassical standards tend to make disabled figures central to their action.”

Encountering monstrosity always invites the same question: What is the meaning? Traditionally, meaning is understood as intent, as codified in “the intentionalist thesis”: a text means what its author intends it to mean. If so, what prodded Norman Rabkin to write Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning in 1981? He worried that “a thesis about what the play means denies to Shakespeare’s intention or the play’s virtue what [it] actually does to us.” Rabkin articulated Shakespearean meaning in the exact terms of Fish’s reader-response criticism: “What it does is what it means.” When we ask, What does Richard’s opening soliloquy mean?, therefore, we must also ask, What does it do?

The intermingling of prologue and protagonist draws attention to the manifold orders of interpretation available in Richard III. Recognizing the audience and speaking directly to them acknowledges the theatrical event—thus, the inevitability of interpretation. Making the audience, not the author, the arbiter of meaning, Richard III is “predestined to contain the prolegomena of interpretation,” said Walter Benjamin. Imminent interpretation becoming a formal feature of the text changes the center of the dramatic event from the stage to the audience. Here, at last, is the meaning of Richard’s opening address, understanding meaning as intent. Shakespeare intended not an idea but an experience—specifically, the pleasure of assuming the authority of interpretation conferred upon the audience at the start of this play. The text is monstrous because meaning resides in both the intent of the author and the experiences of its audiences. In every imaginable sense, authority is “deformed” in Richard III.
II. Disability, Tragedy, and Etiology

If the start of Richard III is a well-wrought monster, its prodigious head is the main clause of the long opening sentence, Richard’s chilling “I am determinèd to prove a villain” (1.1.30). The meaning of Richard’s entire address, arguably Shakespeare’s entire play, hinges on this line—on who or what is the agent of determination. You might make God or nature or society the agent: I was destined to be a villain. Or you might make Richard himself the agent: I have resolved to be a villain. As Richard later gloats, in the second-most-important line of the play, he can “moralize two meanings in one word” (3.1.83). Richard “moraliz[ing]” meanings turns linguistic ambiguity into an ethical concern. The verbal phrase “I am determinèd” brings with it the imprecision inherent to the passive voice, giving audiences the responsibility of assigning grammatical agency, announcing a perennial problem of moral agency.

Entailed in this routine grammatical decision are competing modes of tragedy. Is the play governed by a fate that lords over the protagonist (I was destined. . .) or by the protagonist’s desire for revenge (I have resolved. . .)? It would be reductive to say that Renaissance dramatists took the theme of fate from the Greeks and that of revenge from the Romans, but this formulation focuses the central concerns of the two classical traditions of tragedy. Are the bodies that pile up in Richard III the result of the title character’s attempt to avoid his destiny (as symbolized by his body), or is he revenging the injustices committed against him (and his body) by nature and society? He may “moralize two meanings in one word,” but Shakespeare upstaged Richard by moralizing two entire traditions of tragedy in the word “determinèd.”

Shakespeare strung “I am determinèd” to the conditional “since I cannot prove a lover” (1.1.28), driving the core question of the play back to the cause of Richard’s sexual frustration. Richard blames it on his body—in the words of another play published soon after Richard III, “Loue and deformitie cannot agree”28—but why would disability exclude one from the joys of love? By branding the most crucial question of the play onto Richard’s body, Shakespeare created more problems than he solved: the play now requires a theory of disability. Our interpretation of the entire play follows from what we decide to do with Richard’s body, which is why Shakespeare put it first. “Richard’s body—and the various processes used to diagnose that body—always take center stage,” Allison Hobgood observes.29 And Richard III has remained central to modern culture because it presents the fragility of the human body as a starting point for reflection on the tragic—that in life which makes us sad—extending this consideration to a series of problems that cut to the core
of modern thought, including the tension between appearance and reality, the conflict between individual will and external forces of nature and culture, the possibility of upward social mobility, and social interaction between self and other, including questions of stigma, discrimination, prejudice, hatred, oppression, power, and justice.

Encountering Richard’s disability, audiences become literary detectives, seeking, like Polonius in *Hamlet*, to “find out the cause of this effect / Or rather say the cause of this defect, / For this effect defective comes by cause” (2.2.100–103). All Shakespearean tragedy asks audiences the same question. It’s the question Benvolio asks about his cousin’s melancholy at the start of *Romeo and Juliet*: “Do you know the cause?” (1.1.138). Shakespearean tragedy is fundamentally about etiology—the study of causes. It’s about what determines the course of events, the circumstances that shape individuals and their decisions about meaning and action. And at the end of Shakespearean tragedy, audiences must say what one citizen says at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*: “We see the ground whereon these woes do lie, / But the true ground of all these piteous woes / We cannot without circumstance descry” (5.3.179–181). An ironic drama like Shakespeare’s, moralizing many meanings at once, authorizes none, invites an audience to supply the “ground[s]” of interpretation, which are contingent upon the “circumstance[s]” of a given audience, predicated on its situation in time. Like its title character, the play *Richard III* is “unfinished” because its words only acquire meaning when placed in time. Like Richard, this play was “sent before [its] time . . . scarce half made up” because meaning, although it ought to reside in the author’s intent and thus be stable, is flexible and does not come into existence until after the text enters the world. The notion of meaning based on authorial intent is not invalidated but is seriously complicated by an ironic author like Shakespeare, who intends for different audiences to have different experiences when responding to the same text.

Richard proceeds to murder his way through family, friends, and enemies. We know the outcome, but “do you know the cause”? As epitomized by the ambiguity in Richard’s “I am determinèd,” the origin of Richard’s villainy is anything but determined. Yes, all literature is open to interpretation. Some texts embrace that openness, and some resist it. *Richard III* obsesses over it, thematizes it, and depends upon it for its artistic effect because Shakespeare paired the ambiguity in his representation of Richard’s disability with a certain density of implications. I can think of no other moment in Renaissance literature that calls upon as many contexts of interpretation—artistic, historical, theological, philosophical, ethical, psychological, sociological,
scientific—as Richard’s body. Its contingency combined with a certain impli-
cativity makes Richard’s body simultaneously inscrutable, malleable, visceral,
and consequential.

III. Disability, Philosophy, and History

Shakespeare’s Richard III creates an interpretive space around disability, de-
fining the contours of the questions to be asked, but not answering them
apart from suggesting that responses are always conditioned by the con-
text in which we come to Richard’s body. In describing what is uniquely
Shakespearean about Shakespeare’s Richard III, this book highlights shift-
ing circumstances of composition and interpretation and the implications of
Shakespeare’s decision to defer the meaning of Richard’s body to different
interpretive contexts. As the variously configured origin of the tragedy that
occurs in Richard III, his disability is a way into intellectual history, allowing
us to watch ourselves forming ideas, to see where they come from and how
they work. Richard’s body reveals histories of moral judgment on individual
and cultural levels.

Consider a question commonly asked of Shakespeare’s character—Is Rich-
ard evil?—which only becomes interesting when evil is historicized. In Evil in
Modern Thought (2002), Susan Neiman argues that theologians and philoso-
phers before the eighteenth century did not strongly separate natural evil from
moral evil.\textsuperscript{30} Saint Augustine developed these terms (\textit{malum naturale} and
\textit{malum morale}) in his argument that evil is really only the absence of God’s
goodness. “Natural evil” is the absence of the natural order God established
upon creation. It includes death, disease, and what insurance companies call
natural disasters—disruptions of nature causing pain or suffering that exist
independent of human agency. “Moral evil” is radical wrongdoing—sin—
“the evil that men do” (\textit{Julius Caesar}, 3.2.73), which Augustine saw as the
absence of virtue, as defined by God’s revealed law. Nieman argues that,
while the distinction goes back to Augustine, modern philosophy only truly
began when writers started treating natural and moral evil independently and
disentangling them from a necessary connection—a conceptual uncoupling
that came after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

Before Lisbon, most European philosophy and theology understood all
manifestations of pain and suffering to have an active agent behind them.
One version made God the agent, arguing that natural evil is deity punish-
ing moral evil. The Book of Genesis describes how, displeased with iniquity,
“the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah, brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven.”31 Augustine thought that it’s not God but demonic forces and fallen angels who are responsible for such disasters. Here, natural evil is still the punishment for moral evil, not directly but because natural evil only exists due to the moral evil of humankind’s original sin in the Garden of Eden, itself a product of temptation from the Devil. Augustine concluded that “the originall cause of euill or sinne” is “the revolting will, first of angels, and afterwards of men.”32 Natural evil is here a catastrophic consequence of an ancient demonic moral evil. So, the premodern approach to the problem of evil saw any instance of horrific pain and suffering as a sign that signifies—somehow, someway, somewhere—some unethical action. Shakespeare’s Cassius voices this attitude in Julius Caesar—“Of your philosophy you make no use, / If you give place to accidental evils” (4.3.144–145)—for all natural evil is connected to moral evil, no accidents, in this line of thought.

In contrast, Neiman’s modern philosophers see natural evil as “sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (Macbeth, 5.5.27–28). After Lisbon in 1755—when the fourth-largest city in Europe, not only a cultural and commercial center but also the capitol of a devout Catholic country, experienced ninety thousand of its citizens dying under the rubble of dozens of fallen churches—it became increasingly difficult for philosophers to justify natural evil as a sign of moral evil. In 1756, a young Immanuel Kant wrote three essays for the Konigsberg weekly newspaper, insisting that earthquakes are not supernaturally significant events.33 In his “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster” (1756), Voltaire attacked the “whatever is, is right” axiom of Leibnizian optimism.34 In response to the realization that “Lisbon ought not to have happened, but it did,” modern thinkers in Neiman’s argument came to a new understanding of evil: “Nature has no meaning; its events are not signs. We no longer expect natural objects to be objects of moral judgment, or even to reflect or harmonize with them” (267–268). Philosophers separated natural from moral evil and gradually stepped away from the former. Scientists became the authorities on natural disasters because philosophers no longer had purchase on the means to account for human pain and suffering with no agent behind it. Natural evil faded from philosophical conversations as unfortunate yet inevitable and philosophically inexplicable; empirically minded discussions turned to moral evil and the ethics governing it.

Historically, there are strong conceptual links between metaphysics and disability—between abstract theories of how and why the world works as it does and our all too particular bodies that often don’t work as we want. That’s
why, writing in 1604, Joseph Hall cited sin in the Garden of Eden (moral deprivation) as the source of physical deformity in humans (natural deprivation): “At first, we were created vpright both in soule and body, but since through sinne, we are become deformed both in soule and bodye.” 35 From the premodern perspective outlined by Neiman, the statement Richard is evil covers both his body (a natural evil) and his behavior (a moral evil). Consider Shakespeare’s King Henry VI, just before Richard kills him:

The owl shrieked at thy birth, an evil sign;  
The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time;  
Dogs howled and hideous tempest shook down trees;  
The raven rooked her on the chimney’s top;  
And chatt’ring pies in dismal discords sung.  
Thy mother felt more than a mother’s pain,  
And yet brought forth less than a mother’s hope—  
To wit, an undigested and deformed lump,  
Not like the fruit of such a goodly tree.  
Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born  
To signify thou cam’st to bite the world. (3 Henry VI [3H6], 5.6.44–54)

The convoluted logic of these claims surfaces in their convoluted language. Henry speaks not of “a sign of evil” but of “an evil sign”: the sign itself, the natural evil, is just as “evil” as the moral evil it’s supposed to signify. But is the “evil sign” the shrieking owl or the birth of Richard? Henry’s grammar allows for either reading, but it might not matter, because Henry’s point is that a piling up of signs attended Richard’s birth. Among the eerie animal cries, the sign that stands out is that “tempests shook down trees.” In the early modern age, physical deformity and natural disasters were grouped together in what Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston call “the canon of prodigious events”: “comets and other celestial apparitions, floods, earthquakes, rains of blood or stones, and of course monstrous births.” 36 While hugely different phenomena, these events were grouped because they were understood to be disturbances (per Augustine, privations) of the goodness of God’s created order. They were natural evils and, as such, signified moral evil, just as Henry says that Richard’s body “signif[ies]” his actions. Only as different signs of the same thing can Richard’s deformity and villainy “signify” each other. The implication, from an Augustinian perspective, is that this symbolic connection of deformity and villainy—this “evil”—points both backward to the original moral evil
of the devil who introduced natural evil into the world and forward to the eventual moral good of the God who will erase all evil upon the apocalypse. Shakespeare called these superstitions “the excellent foppery of the world” in King Lear—“as if we were villains on necessity . . . and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting-on” (1.2.107–114). It is a question of etiology—the study of causes—in King John:

No natural exhalation in the sky,  
No scope of nature, no distempered day,  
No common wind, no customèd event,  
But they will pluck away his natural cause  
And call them meteors, prodigies, and signs,  
Abortives, presages, and tongues of heaven. (3.4.153–158)

Given the modernization of evil narrated by Neiman, one would expect (and would be right) that premodern (pre-Lisbon) principles and modern (post-Lisbon) principles bring very different responses to the question Is Richard evil? The conclusions might be the same—Richard is evil—but that statement has different meanings before and after Lisbon.

IV. From Reader’s Response to the Anthropology of Audience

Making Richard alternately a villain and a victim, the stigmatization of his body has provoked more passion than any other event in England’s political history. For centuries, professional historians have indignantly dismissed the image of an evil, deformed tyrant, while popular culture sheepishly preserves it. As Fish persistently asks in his reader-response criticism, “What if that controversy is itself regarded as evidence?” What do the competing interpretations of Richard reveal about the original object itself—Shakespeare’s text? Jean Howard points from the classic questions critics often ask about Richard toward answers:

Is Richard’s hunchback the cause of his villainy or merely its outward sign? Are his villainy and deformity unique or simply the most tangible manifestation of a social deformity that reaches far beyond this single character? Richard’s hump invites such questions, but the answers must be sought by broadly surveying the dramatic world in which Richard is placed.
The multi-temporality of the physical disability of Shakespeare’s Richard III—a medieval king experiencing both ancient and modern forms of stigma over the course of three Shakespearean plays that have been wildly popular in theater and criticism in the early-modern, modern, and postmodern ages—highlights the extra-textuality of this literary figure. The circumstantial nature of Richard’s disability, its unavoidable reference to “the dramatic world in which Richard is placed,” prevents textual criticism from capturing its full meaning. Shakespeare’s representation of Richard III’s disability is a literary event that extends beyond a material text. It draws upon and captures the interplay among all elements of artistic meaning: the intent of the author, the experiences of audiences, and the worlds of author and audience. Because it demands attention in time, the meaning of Richard’s body is experiential, only emerging, in Rabkin’s words, “by watching one’s own responses” (19). If so, experiential meaning also involves observing the responses of others. If, as Rabkin writes, “we are going to call the distillation of our experience of one of the plays its meaning” (23), our experience is not just personal but also cultural. Reception history is integral to the meaning of Richard’s body insofar as Shakespeare made interpretive debate about disability a formal feature of his text. As Genevieve Love writes, “We are drawn to attend to Richard’s locomotion, an understudied aspect of his disabled embodiment”—not only his movement within the play or on the stage but his “refracting oscillations” in culture.

Because of its ability to draw out assumptions of audiences over time, a text like Richard III can be used to perform a reader-response criticism of culture. When Fish analyzes the series of meanings made in the course of interpretation, the record is always volatile, he theorizes, because the understanding formulated “when perceptual or interpretive closure is hazarded” gets revised upon the receipt of more information—when we read the next line. Something similar happens in cultural history, the certainties of one age revised by the certainties of the next. We can shift the apostrophe (to readers’) in Fish’s maxim that “it is the structure of the reader’s experience rather than any structures available on the page that should be the object of description” (152). By treating a Shakespearean text like a perplexing line of poetry, and its reception history like the eyes of a reader scanning sequentially through it, making sense of the text and then remaking sense, cultural historians can discover not what a text means but what it does. This approach is “radically historical,” as Fish would say, because “the critic has the responsibility of becoming not one but a number of informed readers, each of whom will be identified by a matrix of political, cultural, and literary determinants.”
These contextual “determinants” of audience interpretation are the real agent at work in Richard’s “I am determinèd to prove a villain,” for it is ultimately the structures of etiological thought in different ages that turn Richard’s actions into evidence proving him evil, however conceived. The combination of Shakespeare’s textual ambiguity and cultural popularity creates opportunities to use Shakespeare to do cultural studies—an anthropology of audience.

V. Richard III in Disability History

Siebers wanted a new literary icon: “When Disability Studies takes Richard III as its standard-bearer, it models itself after a murderer.”42 Seeking characters with disability knowledge rather than disability power, he offered Ophelia and Falstaff. Yet if Richard III is seen not as a dramatic character confined to Shakespeare’s play but as a multi-temporal disabled man whose body has been defined, redefined, erased, recovered, repurposed, and reclaimed in successive eras from the Middle Ages to modernity, he represents knowledge of disability history.

Constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed over centuries, Richard III’s body is an opportunity for disability histories spanning the period categories that scholars construct—medieval, early-modern, modern, postmodern, whatever-we’re-in-now. His is the story of a disabled individual’s body that is often controlled by others and only recently reclaimed by the disability community. The central site of stigma in English history, Richard III reveals layers of disability experience—the individual’s relationships with their body, with society, and with history. Richard ensures that complexity and openness of interpretation remain at the center of disability history. As a disability phenomenon that is both historical and well known today, Richard III can connect disability history to the activism essential to academic disability studies. “The reconstruction of a usable past can contribute to the building of an accessible future,” as Paul K. Longmore put it.43 But Richard III will remain central to the disability community only if scholars are able to recover the role of disability in this medieval king’s biography and only if disabled individuals today find value in explorations of the disability experience made possible by Shakespeare’s cultural prominence.

Identifying people with disabilities as “an oppressed group in society” in 1973, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation drew a distinction between impairment (a feature of the body) and disability (imposed by society) that guides all disability studies and disability history.44 These fields attend to both the individual’s experience and a culture’s attitudes.
Thus, the emphasis on theorizing normality and ableism in early disability studies was matched by efforts to empower disabled voices in culture, scholarship, and legislation, epitomized in the rallying call of “Nothing about Us without Us.”

Similarly, disability history emphasizes the experience of individuals with disabilities rather than cultural biases, while remembering that encounters with ableism are part of the disability experience. To capture these layers, the first major disability historian, Henri-Jacques Stiker, influenced by Michel Foucault, employed a “historical anthropology” that sought to speak with disabled people of the past by detailing the structures of the societies they lived in: “To speak at all pertinently of disabled people discloses a society’s depths.” In 2000, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder similarly pursued “an anthropological unearthing of images that could help to reconstruct a period’s point of view on human variation.” By one account, disability history moved from the margins to the mainstream in 2001.

Early attempts to theorize disability history were explicitly intersectional, citing the feminist field of women’s history and efforts to recover other historically stigmatized identities related to race, gender, sexuality, religion, and class. Soon came Christopher Bell’s critique that disability studies is not intersectional enough; indeed, the cultural history of Richard III’s body is often a record of what White, able-bodied, English-speaking men have thought about it, with some important exceptions the closer we get to today. As disability studies and disability history continue to become more intersectional in the coming years, Richard III will invite debate about how much of his experience is specific to a wealthy White straight male Christian in medieval England and how much transfers to other identity categories.

Like other oppressed identities, disability is often erased from the historical record—absent from the archive—leading to certain trends in early disability history: emphasis on institutional practices rather than individual lives, attention to the history of stigmatization over historical disability experiences, an orientation toward the modern age, a focus on England and the United States, and—because of all of this.recognition of the need to recover the lived realities of disabled people from the past. Enter literary disability history, where texts by disabled authors and with disabled characters offer glimpses of historically situated disability experiences.

Whereas in 2009 Hobgood and Wood could write that “minimal work has been undertaken on early modern disability,” by 2019 Susan Anderson was able to register that “disability has now become one of the most exciting and lively areas of early modern scholarship.” Building from Greco-Roman,
Judeo-Christian, and medieval European disability histories, early-modern English disability history has identified several common cultural tropes—monstrosity, charity, medicine—plus a range of individual experiences as various as the impairments they involve, both physical and mental. Historians have asked whether it makes sense to use the term “disability” in the middle and early-modern ages. In Shakespeare studies, some have looked at disability before “disability,” instances from the early-modern age that preceded the emergence of the discourse of “disability” in the eighteenth century. Some have explored disability rhetoric that often strays far from physical impairment. Some have argued for the presence of various models of disability—the religious model, the medical model, the social model, the cultural model—in different early-modern texts and traditions. Some have used examples of early-modern disability to build new theories that can inform lived disability experiences today. Some have considered disability in modern performances of early-modern texts. Some have turned their attention to questions of pedagogy when bringing early-modern disability texts into twenty-first-century classrooms.

These methodologies have generated new knowledge. To mention just some, Row-Heyveld has found a stunning number of counterfeit disabilities in early-modern English drama. Love and Williams have shown that moments of disability in early-modern drama raise big theoretical questions about acting and audience in the theater and in everyday life. Hobgood has identified several examples of “disability gain”—personal and social benefits of disability—in early-modern England. Alice Equestri has explored understudied intellectual disabilities in early-modern literature. Grace McCarthy has shown that filmmakers and their directorial decisions often mediate modern engagements with disability in Shakespearean stories. And Sonya Freeman Loftis has redirected attention from Shakespeare’s disabled characters to the lived experiences of present-day Shakespeareans with disabilities, from artists and actors to scholars and activists.

“Concentrating on Richard gives too simplified a picture of disability on the early modern stage,” as Anderson writes. By the same token, restricting ourselves to early-modern drama gives too simple a picture of Richard III. Literary representations of disability—especially those that become canonical—create opportunities for disability histories that track audiences’ responses over time. Deeply embedded in an early-modern age that saw the rebirth of ancient European culture, yet alive today all around the world in performance and adaptation, Shakespeare invites expansive disability histories that span centuries and continents. As the central author in the English language, and
as the author of the most prominent representation of disability, Richard III, Shakespeare provides an opportunity to see disability through time. Richard III may be the main site of this methodology, but it could extend to Falstaff, Ophelia, Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Othello, Caliban, and many others. Some might want Shakespeare to be cleanly either a friend or an enemy of people with disabilities. As someone who was skeptical of all meanings made of disabilities, yet nowhere interested in disability justice, Shakespeare is an uncomfortable ally at best. Yet because disabled Shakespearean characters are often overloaded with meaning in the plays and their afterlives, they allow for expansive cultural studies showing how disability acquires meaning when recontextualized. As someone who represented disability extensively (conveying and challenging the attitudes of his age in equal measure) and whose canonicity means that his disability representations have been interpreted and reinterpreted by centuries of increasingly global audiences, Shakespeare presents opportunities for disability histories.

VI. The Significance of Richard’s Body

By the time he got to Shakespeare, Richard III already had what Linda Charnes calls a “notorious identity,” where infamy becomes an opportunity for rethinking accepted narratives. Why does Richard’s body demand explanation in a series of increasingly global cultures with little in common outside a need to answer some basic questions about human being? Why is Richard’s disability so significant—so full of significance, of signifying power, of the potential to mean very important and very different things to very different people?

Due to the size and difficulty of the task, commentators on Richard’s body have read it in a limited way—picking and choosing from the Henry VI plays, making it little further through Richard III than the wooing of Anne, quoting characters out of context, missing allusions to Richard’s disability unless it is explicitly stigmatized, or using Shakespeare’s character for a thought experiment it might sustain but does not invite. Our general understanding of Richard’s body is not wrong but disjointed, the outcome of a literary representation prodigious in size and monstrous in meaning. The perspectival quality of interpretations of Richard’s disability is both called for by Shakespeare’s text and an occasion for a more expansive consideration of it as a multi-temporal literary phenomenon.

A cultural history of Richard III’s body is a long story with several twists and turns, not only because it addresses Shakespeare’s first and most important depiction of stigma but also because it must attend to different worlds
that create different Richards in different Shakespearean sources, traditions, texts, performances, adaptations, analogs, and criticism. The meaning of Richard’s disability changes with time, not only in the course of Shakespeare’s plays but also in the broader cultural history surrounding them. When reading or watching Shakespeare’s first tetralogy in sequence, one is tossed between backward-looking and forward-thinking representations of stigma. This dialectic is not positively resolved in the text, leaving Shakespeare’s representation of disability open for appropriation in different time periods that embrace different attitudes toward stigma.

An interpretation of Richard’s body is never just an interpretation of Richard’s body. It’s a statement symbolic of one’s core theological, philosophical, historical, and ethical habits and beliefs. Richard’s disability as Shakespeare presents it has such massive implications because it exposes the assumptions, motives, and operations of thought. When we interpret Richard’s disability, it interprets us in return. It brings us to declare our motives and commitments in our attempts to unfold, explain, condemn, justify, defend, and so forth. It catches something in our core and brings it to the surface through its configuration of abstract questions about reality and issues specific to our bodies. It brings us to consider how we would and should respond when, like Richard, we are born into a world that is totally confusing, deeply unsatisfying, or both.

Not all literary texts elicit such core elements of our existence. Something about the body of Shakespeare’s Richard III makes for high-stakes literature. Something at the nexus of these two early-modern Englishmen, Richard III and William Shakespeare, speaks with urgency to something central in modern life. I believe that it is Richard’s disability and Shakespeare’s irony: Shakespeare’s ironic representation of Richard’s disability captures the problem of interpretation in an age obsessed with materiality. Like Shakespeare’s Richard III, modern thought starts with embodiment and ends with ethics, making modern thought structurally analogous to the critical tradition devoted to the relationship between Richard’s body and behavior. To interpret Richard’s disability in Shakespeare’s play is to confront, symbolically, the conditions and possibilities of ethical thought and action in the modern world.

*Richard III* connects four things—physical disability, moral depravity, political tyranny, and social tragedy—resulting in a character and a plot that have signified for audiences the epitome of evil. Audiences with local, specific concerns—physical, moral, political, social—find in *Richard III* a framework for thinking about the tension between the desirable and the undesirable. That tension manifests in any number of ways: beauty versus ugliness, ability
versus disability, virtue versus vice, love versus hate, power versus weakness, freedom versus subjugation, and so forth. Ultimately, Shakespeare’s Richard III is not about any one form of evil as much as it is about the mystery of tragedy understood as the invisible and inscrutable structure of relationships among those things—physical, mental, ethical, social, political—that evoke pity and fear. Disability isn’t tragic, yet the interpretation of disability mirrors the interpretation of tragedy: accounts of causation and significance mustered in response to disability and tragedy closely resemble each other. To interpret Richard’s disability is to interpret the problems that repeatedly present themselves in modern life. The range of possible responses to that which is not good in life—random accidents, romantic failures, financial hardships, social conflict, political corruption, crime, war, death, mourning, loneliness, uncertainty—is contained within the tradition dedicated to the interpretation of Richard’s body. These problems’ origination in disability in Shakespeare’s text reveals the hidden centrality of disability to questions of modernity and transcends that context through conceptual affinities with other identities.

Interpreting disability in Shakespeare’s first tetralogy is a lot like interpreting disability in life, not because the plays are an exact copy of nature, for they are the opposite—filled with artifice. In Shakespeare’s plays, as in life, so many conflicting interpretations lie between us and disability, layers upon layers, each asking us to accept its claims, that we have no pure, unfiltered experience with the thing we seek to understand. Richard’s disability—a physical thing visible in the character’s body and the recipient of competing interpretations from other characters—reflects the status of Richard III himself as both a historical person (open to interpretation) and a literary character (already interpreted by Shakespeare). When making sense of Richard’s disability, we are interpreting not only his physical body but also the meanings made of it dramatically and historically. The interpretation of Richard’s disability is always an interpretation of interpretations and, as such, involves a second-order discourse about how interpretation works. This dynamic extends to Hamlet’s madness and Falstaff’s obesity: those famous Shakespearean creations have, like Richard’s disability, marked physical conditions obsessively interpreted in the plays. That quality of being always already interpreted is what drives thought from interpretation to reflection upon the stakes and implications of interpretation, upon meaning and significance.

The emblem of this idea is Salvador Dalí’s 1955 Portrait of Laurence Olivier in the Role of Richard III (see Figure I.2). While Dalí’s image of Olivier’s image of Shakespeare’s image of Richard III includes the traditional deformities—humped left shoulder, withered left hand—the canvas is disrupted
on the left side, which depicts the fractured or split subjectivity associated with the modern age. Richard’s face—prosthetic nose, wig, medieval hat—at three-quarters turn is overlain (awkwardly, unnaturally) on top of half of Olivier’s unadorned face, which floats bodiless. It’s not that actor blends into character; rather, the multiple personalities in play here—Richard, Olivier, Dalí—cannot be contained within one human body. The righthand side of Richard’s body dissolves into a landscape of Bosworth field: what Richard does (his actions) becomes who he is (his body). The Richard III myth
captured on the right side of Dalí’s canvas points backward into a specific moment in medieval English history (Bosworth Field) and forward into generalizable aspects of modern subjectivity (Laurence Olivier). Additional layers of significance emerge in a photograph of Olivier sitting for Dalí (see Figure I.3). This image includes an overabundance of media—it is a photograph of a modern theatrical performance of an early-modern work of literature based on medieval history—gesturing to the refractions of Richard III over time and across cultures (just as Olivier appears three times in the photo: once in the chair, once in the mirror, and once on Dalí’s canvas). As the viewer of this photograph, we consider one artist (Dalí) considering another artist (Olivier) considering another artist (Shakespeare) considering Richard III and his body.

Further recursions come in Peter Sellers’s comic riffs—performing the Beatles song “A Hard Day’s Night” as Olivier’s Richard III in 1965 or “recit[ing] the soliloquy from Shakespeare’s Richard III whilst, and at the same time, playing tuned chickens” on The Muppet Show in 1977. The villain in the 2001 animated children’s movie Shrek, Lord Farquaad, recalls Olivier’s Richard III—the shoulder-length black hair, the bright red clothes,
the campy tyranny—while reconstituting Richard’s disability as dwarfism. Farquaad’s size is both a frequent gag (“Men of his stature are in short supply”) and the origin of his clownish ambition (“Do you think he’s maybe compensating for something?”). Disability is especially used for glib comedy in the stage production of *Shrek the Musical* (2008), an adaptation of an adaptation of an adaptation: an able-bodied actor wearing fake legs moves around on his knees, to audience laughter. While this recursion of Richard is obnoxiously ableist, it also shows a history of reconfiguration to be central to the prominence of Richard’s body in the twenty-first century. The core of any modern encounter with Richard III is interpretation, not just in the context of other interpretations but in the context of interpretations of interpretations of interpretations.