

**Essaka Joshua, *Physical Disability in British Romantic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. x + 302. £75. ISBN 9781108836708.**

In her ground-breaking study of the presentation and implications of physical disability in British Romantic literature, Essaka Joshua challenges the ‘first wave’ (2) of disability studies in order to provide a novel and intersectional understanding of how physical disability, capacity, and deformity are presented in Romantic literature, separating aesthetics and function and maintaining this distinction through the structure and organisation of the study, as well as exploring the implications of these representations for both contemporary and modern disabled people. Joshua convincingly argues that previous theories and metanarratives of disability, which are concisely explained in the introduction, are only partial and anachronistic, limiting our ability to analyse disability in the Romantic period. Her evaluation of existing scholarship in the field makes the book highly approachable and accessible to those less well-versed in disability studies.

The study begins with chapters on William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, as a ‘useful starting point for systematically unpacking some of the pre-disability concepts of the period’ (34). Although both authors have already been extensively studied, Joshua notes how previous studies often miss or replicate the ableist assumptions within their works; the necessity of this novel study is thus underlined by the fact that ‘it is relatively new for scholars to question the disparagement of impairment in the discourse of emancipation’ (96) despite Wollstonecraft’s depiction of weak women having been (rightly) thoroughly discussed through the lens of misogyny. In these two chapters, Joshua recognises and unpacks the way in which Wollstonecraft and Godwin, in separate works, attempt to attack one hierarchy (class or patriarchy) by enforcing another (capacity), revealing a hypocrisy and oversight in their work and the work of their critics and exposing the much broader issue of disabled people being left behind even within radical spaces. These ideas are logically built upon and developed throughout the chapters and make an excellent starting place as they ‘provide evidence that late eighteenth-century writing on social equality shows a deep interest in capacity’ (64), setting up the philosophical context for the evaluation of works to follow.

Although in my opinion weaker than other chapters, the chapter on Wordsworth’s ‘The Discharged Soldier’ nonetheless succeeds in presenting a novel and thoughtful reading into why and how we treat disabled people, and the politics of ‘deservedness’ that, in Wordsworth’s poem, are explored in the context of desert claims but remain relevant today in the form of rigorous Personal Independence Payment (PIP) testing, for example.

Part two begins with a chapter on picturesque aesthetics, providing a detailed philosophical context for the following discussions of deformity and how those with deformities are treated and seen, as well as underlining the importance of exploring deformity in addition to function. Furthermore, the philosophies discussed here ‘highlight the significance of deformity for questions that are fundamental to aesthetic production and appreciation in the Romantic era’ (121). Through this chapter, Joshua maintains the distinction between modern notions of disability and pre-disability concepts that are more appropriate to apply to the literature discussed. Similarly to the study’s introduction, this chapter functions to make part two of the book equally approachable and accessible to those less well-versed in disability studies, and especially in far less discussed notions of pre-disability. Expanding upon these ideas, the following chapter on Frances Burney’s *Camilla* explores the novel’s significance in disrupting the previously explored association of able-bodiedness with virtue and evaluates *Camilla*’s place in the history of pre-disability by its introducing relational approaches to deformity centuries before relational approaches to disability begin to appear. Similarly, Burney recognises a deformity/disadvantage binary that ‘anticipates the impairment/disability

binary of the social barriers approach to disability' (141), underlining the relevance of this analysis to modern disability studies.

Finally, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is analysed through a focus on how deformity is seen by others. Although deformity in *Frankenstein* has been heavily discussed, Joshua's study is novel in that she sets aside modern disability concepts in order to 'explore historically accurate group terms such as "deformity" and "monstrosity"' (160). Furthermore, she places emphasis on the ways of looking at monstrosity rather than the body of the creature itself, highlighting Shelley's interest in the 'creature's quest to find a sympathetic viewer' (178); these ways of seeing hold much more relevance for people with visible disabilities or deformities today. Joshua concludes this chapter by asserting that *Frankenstein* 'invites the reader to receive monstrosity and deformity transformatively' (180), acting as the creature's 'sympathetic viewer' (178).

Overall, Joshua succeeds in re-evaluating the history of disability through its presentation in literature and examining the consequences of these depictions for disabled people, giving the study an importance that much previous analysis lacked. Joshua re-examines texts and authors considered well-known and thoroughly analysed through a uniquely important lens.

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