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Silent Histories: Writing Disability Back into Renaissance History

Rosamund Oates

Until relatively recently, histories of renaissance Europe focussed on men who were white, cis-gender and usually heterosexual. Even more narrowly, those men tended to be kings, princes and their advisors; parliamentarians and city fathers; or perhaps archbishops and bishops. Furthermore, the artists and writers who provided historians with their evidence also tended to be men, ensuring that the male gaze was foregrounded in visual and literary representations of renaissance Europe. This was an early modern world that – apart from exceptional characters like Lucrezia Borgia or Anne Boleyn – was ‘male and pale’.

Over the last 50 years the historical landscape has shifted enormously. Feminist historians, social historians, and more recently historians of gender, sexuality and race have produced increasingly inclusive histories of the period portraying a world that was more richly populated and diverse than traditional 20th-century histories of renaissance Europe suggested. [i]

But one continuing area of silence is disability. People with physical and mental impairments (as we understand them) were no less common in early modern Europe than they are today: in fact, with the disabling effects of many common illnesses like smallpox, mumps and measles bodily difference may have been even more apparent. So why the continuing silence, particularly in popular histories of the renaissance?

Firstly, I should say that there are now academics (history, English literature, art history) working hard to unearth those difficult-to-reach histories of disability in early modern Europe, including (but not limited to) Jenni Kuulia, Elizabeth Bearden, Josef Fulka, and Angelo Lo Conte. [ii] And often – as with my work on deafness – academic research builds on work by disabled historians outside the academy. [iii] But compared to other areas of renaissance studies, an interest in disability has been slow to develop. In part, of course, this reflects the make-up of the academy, with well-documented barriers to entry for disabled scholars to Higher Education Institutions like universities. [iv] But it also reflects another problem with trying to discover the experiences of a range of historically unknown and diverse characters: it is really hard to find the sources.

This explains why in Early Modern studies, the interest in disability has been driven forward by literature specialists. They have studied prominent disabled figures in Shakespeare’s plays (most notably the hunchbacked Richard III), with David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder alerting us to ‘narrative prosthesis’ – the extent to which a disability highlighted a feature of the protagonist’s character. (In Shakespeare’s play, Richard is both literally, as well as figuratively, twisted and therefore capable of all kinds of nefarious deeds). [v] Elizabeth Bearden has explored a range of renaissance texts to explore ideas of ‘normalcy’ and ‘monstrosity’ in the depiction of disabled bodies, while Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood have encouraged scholars to ‘ethically

gaze' on the unusual and abnormal bodies to be found in renaissance literature. [vi] Representations of disability on 'stage and page' do matter. As Cory James Rushton has argued in his account of Henry VI's paralysis, examples of disability which may be 'rendered socially invisible' were often addressed explicitly in plays and prose. Furthermore, literary representations were an important part of the process of creating 'normal' and 'abnormal' bodies, a process which enables disablement. [vii]

But representation is only part of the story. As my research elsewhere has shown, legal and literary sources are not always an accurate reflection of the experience of deaf and deafened people in early modern England. There was an apparently widespread legal tradition which stated that prelingually deaf people should be treated as 'infants': unable to either understand the world around them or to express understanding. This led to lively discussions about whether a deaf man could be tried for murder, with a clear argument that (like a young child) he could not be held responsible for his actions. (Although this was a hotly debated topic, as far as I know, the situation never arose in early modern England.) [viii]

The difficulty lies in discovering the lived experiences of deaf people in the towns, villages and countryside of early modern England, and finding out if that matched legal and literary representations. These are largely untold histories of unknown people. And this, for the historian, is where the difficulty comes in. Whereas plays, poems and printed books are fairly accessible – many have even been digitised – the archival sources for experiences of deafness (and other disabilities) are hidden away in a multitude of different libraries and record offices across the country, buried deep within parish records, episcopal archives and legal proceedings. Unlike later periods (or indeed other countries), where hospitals, poor houses and specialist schools offer a fairly coherent set of sources, in the Early Modern period, details of deafness (like deaf people themselves) are scattered the length and breadth of the country.

I have been lucky enough to be awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship to research deafness in early modern England. I will contrast the experiences of people who were deaf or experienced hearing loss with accounts of deafness in legal, philosophical, and literary texts. To do this, I have decided to start with the people themselves and be led by where their stories take me, and so over the last three or four years I have been spending my spare time trying to identify prelingually deaf people (and people with hearing loss) in England from c. 1500-1750.

My starting point has been the welter of parish records produced by an increasingly involved – if at times chaotic – state in Tudor and Stuart England. From the Tudor period, church wardens kept detailed accounts of their parishes, while from 1597 ministers were expected to record burials, christenings and marriages. Sometimes, incidental details linger which help to identify deaf men and women. When the deaf man Thomas Speller married his bride, Sara Earl, using sign language in 1618 the churchwardens of St Botolph's Aldgate in London noted that 'this marriage is set down at length because we never had the like before'. Elsewhere a minister recorded that he married two deaf people without the consent of their parents, their parents having died. There are often casual references to burying 'deaf Cole' or christening the child of a deaf parent. These references can be the key into discovering more about a deaf person. Sometimes they have applied for special licences to get married using sign language, sometimes they have been before the magistrate to request

financial support. If there is property at stake, sometimes those same people (or more often their families) have been to court. [ix]

What is notable so far in the project, however, is how rarely a person's deafness is commented on: even prelingual deafness which had legal ramifications is often only mentioned in passing. More than once I have not been sure I am tracking the right person, until a second unexpected reference to deafness emerges from the depths of the archives. This suggests that these people were integrated into their communities, their deafness largely unworthy of comment. Good for them, hard work for the historian. And of course, this is one of the reasons why disability history can be so difficult. The history of deafness is – on many levels – the history of silence, and the same is true for many other forms of disability too. Yet, however difficult, the history of disability is one that needs to be written. It is as urgent and necessary as recent histories of Black British people, or histories of gender and sex. Renaissance Europe was as multi-faceted, as diverse, and as richly colourful as our current society, we just need to keep looking.

Footnotes:

[i] Most eloquently explored in Catherine J. Kudlick, 'Disability History: Why we need another other', *The American Historical Review* 108: 3 (2003), pp. 763-93.

[ii] See for example, Jenni Kuuliala, *Saints, Infirmary and Community in the Late Middle Ages* (Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam, 2020). Elizabeth B Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds: Body, Space and Narrative in Renaissance Representations of Disability* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2019). Josef Fulka, 'Deafness, Gesture and Sign Language in the 18th Century', *Gesture Studies*, 8: 7 (2020). Angelo Lo Conte, 'A Visual Testament by Luca Riva', *Renaissance Studies*, 32: 2 (2022), 223-251. Rosamund Oates, 'Speaking in Hands: Preaching and Signed Languages for the Deaf', *Past and Present* (2022).

[iii] Peter W. Jackson, *The Gawdy Manuscripts* (British Deaf History Society, Feltham, 2004). Peter W. Jackson, *Alexander Popham's Notebook* (BDHS, Feltham, 2012). David Dram and Japp Maat (eds.), *Teaching Language to a Boy Born Deaf: The Popham Notebook and Associated Texts* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017).

[iv] Most recently: University & College Admission Service, *Pearson and Disabled Students' Commission, Next Steps: What is the Experience of Disabled Students in Education*, MD-7570. (UCAS, Cheltenham, 2022). Office for National Statistics, *Outcomes for Disabled People in the UK 2021*:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2021>

[v] David. T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2001), pp. 95-118.

[vi] Bearden, *Monstrous Bodies*. Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, 'Ethical Staring: Disabling the English Renaissance' in Hopgood and Houston Wood (eds.), *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* (2013), pp. 1-22.

[vii] Cory James Rushton, 'The King's Stupor: Dealing with Royal Paralysis in Late medieval England', in Wendy James Turner, (ed.), *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom* (Brill: Leiden, 2010), pp. 147-176.

[viii] Michael Dalton, *The Country Justice* (Henry Linton, London, 1746 edn.), p. 334.

[ix] Rosamund Oates, 'Speaking in Hands: Preaching, Deafness and Sign Language in Early Modern England', *Past and Present* (2022).