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Disabled Epistemologies: Failures of Knowledge
and Care in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*
and *Othello*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Disabled Epistemologies: Failures of Knowledge and Care in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*

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The presence of disabled characters like blind Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* and epileptic Othello are handy physical metaphors for the failures of epistemology that occur in both plays. Disability is often construed as a sort of saboteur of knowledge—disability of all kinds inhibiting the ability to perceive the world as an abled person would. But disability also produces a new, necessary sort of knowledge in order to survive and thrive in an unaccommodating world. A disabled epistemology suggests that knowing is contingent on individual, specific experience of the world. Tied to this issue of disabled epistemology is the issue of care—the field's emphasis on issues of relationality and reciprocity gels with disability's concerns about autonomy, self-determination, and accommodation. The ways in which care succeeds or fails informs us of the ways that disability intersects with class, race, and embodied knowledge. Gobbo is operating within a system that cares about him. Disabled beggars like Gobbo are subject to suspicion but expected to receive charity, and the embodied knowledge required to perform disability to an audience grants him access to that charity. On the other hand, because epilepsy and Otherness are compounded in Othello's society, to embrace embodied knowledge of his epilepsy is to become too foreign. To openly acknowledge and work with his disability would make him more socially vulnerable than he already is, but in ignoring it, Othello makes himself physically vulnerable. The dominant ideology cannot allow Othello to understand himself as disabled.

Keywords: *Othello*, *Merchant of Venice*, disability, care, epistemology, blindness, epilepsy

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Introduction

It is difficult to name a Shakespeare play in which no characters are impaired by madness, blindness, missing or crippled limbs, or advanced age. This diverse use of disability makes sense; disabled individuals are one of the few minority groups that is perhaps overrepresented in fiction because of the narrative interest and symbolic power that disabled bodies provide, and Shakespeare's work is no different (Mitchell and Snyder 226). His disabled characters often function as tangible representations of the themes of the play. Thus, blind Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* is a comically literal example of one of three fathers in the play who does not truly know his own child.¹ Similarly, Othello's bout of epilepsy is physical example of the way his intense but restrained passion overwhelms his sense (Schoenfeldt 799). But there is a problem with reading these examples of disability as solely allegorical. First and foremost, to read this way is to dismiss and suppress actual disabled experiences, to deny them complexity and humanity. Knowing is frequently "disabled" in Shakespeare's theater, and the presence of disabled characters like blind Gobbo and epileptic Othello are handy physical metaphors for the failures of epistemology that occur in both plays. But tying this disabled knowing to real disabled characters invites further questions of disabled being, of the impact that stigma and impairment have on both the perception and perceiving of disabled individuals. From the outside looking in, disability is often construed as a sort of saboteur of knowledge—blindness, deafness, and madness all inhibit one's ability to truly perceive the world as an abled person would. But, at the same time, disability also produces a new sort of knowledge, a necessary knowledge in order to survive and thrive in an unaccommodating world.

¹ All references to *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* come from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3E, unless otherwise specified.

Review of Literature

It is for this reason that disability studies in Shakespeare is a flourishing field, and this paper would not be possible if not for the work David Wood, Alison Hobgood, Tobin Siebers, Lindsey Row-Heyveld and others have done in exploring the ways in which disability as both a metaphor and a lived experience overlap with questions of knowledge, care, and stigma.² The field prioritizes readings based on historical context and the lived experiences of actual disabled people living in the period. While fictional characters are obviously a reflection of the prejudices, assumptions, and philosophical questions held by their creators and the period, disability scholarship maintains that they can offer key insights into the lived experiences of actual disabled people living in the period and even tell us more about contemporary disability. In both method and material, this paper owes much to the work of these scholars, as well as the work of earlier theorists like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder.

Care

The work these scholars have done on understanding disabled epistemologies is essential to my project, but this paper builds off of that work to explore the ways that disabled epistemology relates to issues of intersectionality and care. Care, as outlined by Virginia Held, is an alternative or supplement to justice-based ethics in both public and private spheres. An ethics of care acknowledges that no person is completely autonomous, independent, or rational. Everyone needs care at some point, and the field's emphasis on issues of relationality and reciprocity gels with disability's concerns about autonomy, self-determination, and accommodation (Held 30). In his reading of *Othello*, Justin Shaw builds off of these issues of

² The introduction to Hobgood and Wood's *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* in particular does an excellent job collecting scholarship on disability not just as a strikingly material metaphor, but a reality.

care, in particular Eva Kittay's work on the networks of care—the social and political systems that are, formally or informally, set up to help protect and accommodate people.³ The ways in which these care networks succeed or fail in *Merchant* and *Othello* inform us of the ways that disability intersects with class and race in the world of the plays. Through *Merchant's* Gobbo and *Othello's* titular hero, both plays function as a commentary on a disability rights discussion that continues to be a pressing issue in contemporary disability ethics—who deserves care? Both characters are privileged in some ways and marginalized in others, their ability to access care hindered by classist suspicion and racist malice, respectively. On the one hand, Gobbo's blindness, in conjunction with his apparent poverty, subjects him to initial suspicion but eventual assistance that reflects the early modern social system that Row-Heyveld has explored in several articles.⁴ On the other hand, as Shaw outlines in his essay on the topic, Othello's race, foreignness, and disability are overlapping categories of stigma that work to distance Othello from the people and networks that should protect him, but instead exploit and surveil him (Shaw 173). Proving his disability makes Gobbo a member of what one might anachronistically call the “deserving poor” and consequently grants him access to assistance. But Othello's epilepsy makes him more Black, more Other, and making that epilepsy visible only serves to further distance him from the white world and from assistance.

Ultimately, the fallible, contradictory, and often prejudiced ableist world becomes the arbiter of care. Given the fallibility of knowledge in both plays, care becomes an epistemological issue. Beneath the question of who is deserving of care are questions of knowledge: How do we

³ See Held's *Ethics of Care* for an overview of the field. See Shaw's article "'Rub Him About the Temples': *Othello*, Disability, and the Failures of Care" for his application of Kittay's work to disability and race.

⁴ See Row-Heyveld's *Dissembling Disability in Early Modern English Drama* and "The Lying'st Knave in Christendom": The Development of Disability in the False Miracle of St. Alban's."

know that someone is disabled or impaired? Who is capable of making that assessment? Can disabled people understand a world that they cannot fully access? Are abled people capable of understanding disabled people and making ethical decisions on their behalf?

Cultural model

The cultural model of disability prioritizes the complex relationship between being and knowing, grounding disability in questions of epistemology and making it a useful tool for understanding these issues of care (Hobgood and Woods). According to the cultural model, disabled and abled people live in separate realities created by their divergent experiences with understanding and perceiving. This separate reality of a disabled being in turn effects an abled epistemology, exposing the fragility of both reality and ability. Perfect vision does not translate to perfect understanding. If disability inhibits some means of obtaining knowledge and facilitates other means (and if we understand that the same is true of ability), a picture of reality that fails to acknowledge both epistemologies is incomplete. Furthermore, the nature of ability itself as a fragile and unsustainable condition—even healthy, genetically normative individuals who never experience a disabling illness or injury will eventually be disabled by age—necessitates an eventual adaptation to new ways of knowing. A disabled epistemology, frequently referred to as a “cripestimology” or as embodied knowledge, suggests that knowing is contingent on experience of the world as it is rather than perception of the world as it seems to be, or as it should be (Siebers 439). Embodied knowledge is the knowledge that is produced as a result of being, of a body moving through the world. It is an epistemology that is dependent on individual and specific rather than universal experiences and is practical, even occasionally cynical, in the way it favors the material over the ideal. Characters like Richard III and Falstaff, for example, use this disabled epistemology to navigate their world and manipulate characters by playing to or

against stereotypes of disability (Siebers 440). Both Gobbo's partial success and Othello's failure to thrive come about because they are disabled characters trying to operate with an abled epistemology, rather than embracing a disabled epistemology. When we move beyond the scenes in which their disability gets center stage, Othello's and Gobbo's failures and successes also reveal the larger failures of knowledge and care that occur in the plays.

Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis articulates the recurring structure of disability narrative. With its tendencies to permanently resolve or eliminate disability, the narrative prosthetic structure overlooks the complications of care and embodied knowledge. According to their theory, when a disabled character is introduced, that character creates a problem for the narrative that must be resolved in some way. Essentially, disabled characters exist in fiction because they are narratively interesting and useful for embodying the themes and metaphors of the text, but their disabled existence cannot extend beyond the narrative—which is why so many disabled characters end up dead or cured of their disability by the end of the narrative (Mitchell and Snyder 227). In other words, narrative prosthesis is narrative resolution as an alternative to care; the open-ended and ever-shifting nature of both care and knowledge are antithetical to a tidy narrative resolution. Following the prosthetic narrative arcs of Gobbo and Othello reveals that assistance, care, and embodied knowledge are intimately connected to and dependent on each other. In both cases, disability provokes discomfort in those who witness it, but in their attempts to cope with that discomfort and resolve the disability, how those witnesses choose to deal with that discomfort changes how they treat Gobbo and Othello. The embodied knowledge gained from Gobbo's disability allow him to make himself more acceptable, more comprehensible, but in *Othello*, the opposite is true. Gobbo is subject to mockery and exploitation, but ultimately receives care, assistance, and charity. The responses to Othello's

epileptic fit, on the other hand, are exploitation (from Iago) and indifference (from Cassio). I argue that this difference is a result of each character's differing access to a disabled epistemology. Gobbo is certainly vulnerable, both socially and physically, but he is also operating within a system that cares about him. In his world, disabled beggars are subject to suspicion, but expected to receive charity. The embodied knowledge required to perform disability to an abled audience in the way that they expect allows him access to that charity. Othello's case, on the other hand, is inextricably tied up with his vulnerable social position as a Black man and a foreigner. Where class has a more straightforward relationship with disability, at least in the minds of the abled (Gobbo is blind, therefore he cannot work, therefore he is poor), epilepsy in particular is inseparable from Othello's blackness. Because epilepsy and blackness are compounded in Othello's society, to embrace embodied knowledge of his epilepsy is to become less assimilated, too foreign for his society. Othello openly acknowledging and working with his disability would make him more socially vulnerable than he already is, but in ignoring it, Othello makes himself physically vulnerable to Iago's more targeted venom. Othello is not allowed to fully understand himself as disabled because the dominant ideology cannot allow him to understand.

Methods

Disability Models

Before diving into my analysis of the two plays, a few key terms need to be defined. Multiple theories of disability are in play when we read Shakespeare, and scholars disagree on how to read an early modern text through a disability studies lens. Readings are contingent on different models of disability—on whether the critic reads through a medical, social, or cultural/material model. The medical model is focused mostly on individual impairment, and is

out of fashion in contemporary disability theory, but according to some critics is the closest to how early modern individuals would have navigated disability—concerns about class status and ability to work overriding issues of group identity and even of stigma (Hobgood and Woods 7). We see this lack of concern with group identity in the two characters I tackle for this paper. Neither character is lumped in with a group. Othello's epilepsy is not a separate disability category. Rather, his disability is treated by the text and characters as in keeping with his tragic character and his outsider status.⁵ Gobbo's blindness, on the other hand, is mostly a source of comedy; his characterization is restricted by both class and genre to little more than a figure for mockery. This medical model also overlaps in interesting ways with the period's humoral model, in which disability is individual, but also much more universal. As it conceives of disability and illness as deviation from an ideal rather than deviation from a norm, humoralism renders nearly everyone disabled and *everyone* potentially disabled—an important distinction, given that Othello's identity and epilepsy is humoralized as well as racialized.

A social reading of disability, on the other hand, foregrounds issues of stigma and group identity. Disability becomes difference, and impairment occurs only when a society neglects to accommodate that difference. This social theory of disability is useful for grappling with issues of stigma in Shakespeare's work, but it does have its flaws, as Jeffrey R. Wilson points out, because disability is often combined with other forms of stigma, and group identity does not seem to be a concern for disabled people of the period (Wilson). Caliban for example, also carries connotations of racial stigma alongside his monstrous body, and *Richard III* is full of

⁵ Hobgood, Row-Heyveld, and Schoenfeldt all build a case for this in their articles on *Othello*.

queer and gender-boundary crossing subtext.⁶ While it recovers disability from the medical treatment of disability as universally bad, a social reading can fall into the trap of dismissing the individuality of disabled characters, and ironically undersells the social isolation and oppression to which stigmatized individuals are subject. And, for all that the social model celebrates difference, it can fall into the trap of being overly affirmational, and denigrating the unique experiences and complex strategies and compromises that individual disabled people need to navigate the world—as both a physical reality and an ableist construct—which is where the cultural model comes in.

The cultural model is synonymous with what Tobin Siebers calls a theory of complex embodiment, and grapples with the way disabled people navigate the relationship between the physical reality of their bodies in conjunction with the social structure (Siebers 454). According to Hobgood and Wood, the cultural model “emphasizes the reciprocity between body and culture, between lived corporeal difference and social perception of that lived difference. It destigmatizes disability while still preserving individual, lived experience” (Hobgood 5).

Narrative Prosthesis

Mitchell and Snyder’s ideas on narrative prosthesis and the materiality of metaphor—the concept that disabled individuals exist as an uncomfortably tangible reflection of a text’s themes and tension—are useful for understanding both plays. As it often does, disability frequently takes on a symbolic role as an externalization of the flaws of the hero (in a tragedy) or the society (in a comedy). And while it is difficult to read Shakespeare’s treatment of disability through theories of stigma, narrative prosthesis—the concept that disability exists in order to serve the narrative

⁶ For more on queering disability, see Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory*, and his article on *Richard III* “Fuck the Disabled.”

and then be resolved or “cured” by that narrative—is prominent in plays like *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. If both plays are about, to varying degrees, the struggle to really know and trust our loved ones, Shakespeare’s use of disability ties this emotional struggle with epistemology back to a deeply physical reality that, like disability and the human body, is simultaneously mutable and permanent.

Staring

Lancelet’s interaction with his blind father in *Merchant* Act 2.2 and Othello’s seizure in front of Iago and Cassio in Act 4.1 are what Garland-Thomson refers to as staring encounters.⁷ These encounters are occasions for care that also initiate opportunities for testing and developing embodied knowledge. The ease with which Lancelet and Iago twist these opportunities into occasions for mischief and manipulation suggests that understanding when and how to access care is essential to a disabled epistemology. Furthermore, these encounters suggest that these disabled epistemologies cannot flourish without an extension of care. Thompson frames her staring encounters as reciprocal exchanges. There is potential for learning and connection when the starrer is treated as more than an object of curiosity and instead becomes an active participant in the encounter (Garland-Thomson 175). The two subjects of my analysis are both involved in staring encounters; the success of these encounters varies in part because one (Gobbo) is active and involved in the encounter while the other (Othello) is completely unaware of the staring incident.

Additionally, Hobgood and Wood have proposed (also borrowing from Garland-Thomson) that as scholars we participate in what they call “ethical staring” (Hobgood and Wood

⁷ Garland-Thomson’s work on staring articulates the complex dynamics of power and control that occur when encountering the visibly disabled—dynamics that are at play in both *Merchant* and *Othello*. See *Staring: How We Look* and “Ways of Staring.”

1). Ethical staring demands that we critically engage with disabled characters in texts. It demands that we engage in “a reciprocal interaction in which disability, disability histories, and disability representations stare back” (Hobgood and Woods 2). My engagement with *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice* is my attempt at ethical staring, at looking closely at what epilepsy and blindness do for the text, but also what the text does with Othello and Gobbo beyond the metaphorical level. The characters’ disabilities are material metaphors that reinforce the texts’ thematic failures of knowledge, but they are also evidence of a society that fails to truly know and understand Othello and Gobbo.

Merchant of Venice

Merchant’s larger epistemological themes—including the distinction between sense and knowledge—are embodied through the character of Old Gobbo. The clown Lancelet’s father, Gobbo’s main function in the play is as a piece of comedy, someone for Lancelet to tease and toy with. Lancelet’s mockery is based on Gobbo’s blindness and foolishness. But rather than just being a vehicle for comedy and a material metaphor for the play’s broad themes, Gobbo (and his staring encounters with Lancelet and Bassanio) is an illustration of the concerns that arise when class and disability become overlapping categories. In his short time on stage, Gobbo’s disability is introduced, his need is established as valid, that need is resolved through charity, and he is dismissed from the narrative.⁸ Gobbo is not cured or killed, but Bassanio’s decision to hire Lancelet is construed as charity, a response to Gobbo’s approach and Bassanio’s query, “wouldst

⁸ Gobbo is an incomplete but rather neat example of narrative prosthesis as outlined by Mitchell and Snyder (1) “A marked physical difference is introduced to the reader”—we learn that Gobbo is “gravel blind.” (2) “The narrative accounts for the inclusion of this difference by recounting its origins”—subverted, when Lancelet tries “confusions” instead of conclusions upon him. (3) “This marked difference is brought from the periphery of the narrative to the central focus of its concerns”—this issue of seeing and knowing becomes a central concern of the narrative outside of this comic interlude. (4) “There is an effort to rehabilitate or eliminate this difference, thus resolving the central narrative conflict in a purgation of the social body or a redefinition of essential states of being.

thou aught with me?" (*Merchant* 2.2.108). Gobbo's prosthetic narrative also serves as a prosthetic model for the other, less material disabilities that appear in the text, a way to make material the issues many characters have with knowing their loved ones.

Gobbo's blindness is an embodiment of some of the most unsavory early modern beliefs about disability. The blind beggar figure is a stock character in early modern art and culture, mocked or dismissed because he is powerless (Chess 1). And while he is certainly a subject designed for mockery, his character has more dimension than would have been needed to simply tell a joke, and his existence, if not he himself, is an invitation for a closer look at two problems—how the poor and disabled are treated in this society and how Gobbo's relationship with knowledge is both dependent on, and reveals deeper flaws in that larger society's relationship with knowledge and care. This flawed but somewhat functional system of care is accessible to Gobbo, but only upon the condition that he prove that he is actually impaired. Blindness comes ready made with implications of poverty, impotency, and deception. As with most disabilities, early modern people were anxious about whether or not blind people were faking it, using their impairment as an excuse to beg, one of the only career options available for blind individuals. Lindsey Row-Heyveld argues that the suspicion surrounding disabled beggars, while present in pre-modern society, became more prevalent during the early modern period as the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism dissolved the institutional religious protections for the poor and disabled and diminished the ecclesiastical role of disabled beggars in society. In the prior period, alms were exchanged for prayers from the disabled, a practice that—to a newly Protestant nation—smacked too much of buying one's way into heaven, and the practice of almsgiving consequently became far more fraught. The religious injunction to care for the poor and needy, then, demanded absolute proof from the poor that they *were* needy, and people like

Gobbo would have been subject to emasculation, suspicion, abuse, and harassment from both institutions and the general population (Row-Heyveld “The Lyingst Knave”).

But in spite of his role as a comic figure subject to suspicion, Gobbo’s lived experience as a blind man also gets stage time here. He is not only a prop for humor or mockery. And he is not just a reason to get Lancelet to state one of the major themes of the play either, that it “is a wise father that knows his own child” (*Merchant* 2.2.68). Gobbo’s interaction with Lancelet is an illustration of the suspicion and examination to which blind people in the period were subject. While the character can’t tell us exactly what it is like to be a blind man in the period, his relationship with his own disabled reality is clearly drawn and conflicting with Lancelet’s abled understanding of Gobbo’s impairment, an inconsistency that makes it apparent there are two realities at play. Gobbo interprets his blindness differently than Lancelet does, and even mentions assistive devices, ironically calling Lancelet “the very staff of my / age, the very prop!” which seems unlikely given Lancelet’s predilection for misleading his father (2.2.60). Gobbo also links his own lack of sight explicitly with his own lack of knowledge. “I am sand-blind,” he says to Lancelet, “I know you not” (2.2. 66). Seeing does represent a kind of knowledge for Gobbo, but he also recognizes its fallibility in his case—Gobbo can see partially but inaccurately—and is by the end is able to find other paths toward knowledge, even if his continued inability to tell the difference between a beard and a head of hair suggests that his application of this disabled epistemology is somewhat inconsistent.

In his role as an assistant who is ostensibly there to help but does much more to confuse and further disable his father than he does to assist him, Lancelet uncovers the limits of abled epistemologies and the practical and philosophical benefits of embodied knowledge. Gobbo seeks assistance and is immediately misled because Lancelet’s original motivation is to mock,

rather than assist. He exploits Gobbo in service of humor—an act which suggests that a blind man is only as good as his prosthetic, “the staff of his old age,” and that assistance for the disabled is dependent on the whim of the abled (2.2.60). Gobbo’s choice of the word staff to describe his son explicitly positions him as a prosthetic caretaker, but Lancelet’s instincts to mock and tease and the confusion that follows suggests that a staff with bad intentions may be worse than no staff at all.

Additionally, Gobbo and Lancelet’s interaction has much in common with another scene from Shakespeare—the false miracle at St. Alban’s that occurs in *2 Henry VI*, in which a man who claims he has been blind from birth recovers his sight. He is cross examined until he breaks his charade and reveals that he was never blind. The interlude participates in a classic philosophical tradition of questioning a hypothetical blind man who is both congenitally and stone (completely) blind (Chess 107). In Chess’s analysis of the St. Alban’s scene, the cross examination is not representative of simple paranoia and prejudice, but rather a way to break “down some of the seemingly clear distinction between able and disabled bodies; though the surface of the plot proves that Simpcox can see, and that his blindness was a false miracle, the mechanism for revealing this fraud causes more doubt than clarity” (Chess 115). Essentially, this interlude casts doubt on the strength of abled ability to perceive and understand truth. The audience at St. Albans realize that in believing his story, they have behaved more blindly than the masquerading blind man, and the value of sightedness as a way of ascertaining truth is thrown into doubt.

Even though Lancelet knows his father is blind, his misdirections and jests come across as an attempt to “test” Gobbo’s blindness in an exchange that simultaneously casts doubt on Gobbo’s own reported abilities and on the efficacy of sight as a way to obtain knowledge. The

only way to “prove” Gobbo’s blindness is to submit him to these tests. This approach to Gobbo’s disability evokes Row-Heyveld’s work about the ableist anxiety surrounding masquerading disability (3). When Gobbo appears, Lancelet first informs the audience of his blindness and the degree of it. Gobbo is “more than sand blind—high gravel blind,” so somewhere in between partly blind and completely stone blind, an external assessment that doesn’t quite gel with Old Gobbo’s report of his own impairment (*Merchant* 2.2.31). This observation of degree is interesting as a setup for Gobbo’s attempt to “try confusions on him,” a malapropism of “try conclusions” (or to experiment). Lancelet’s “confusions” lampoon the medical and philosophical cliché of “conclusions” that *2 Henry VI* plays straight.

Ultimately, ignorant trust is the true source of epistemological failure in this scene, not blindness. One of Lancelet’s confusions is to claim that Gobbo’s son (Lancelet himself) is dead. Lancelet does not let Gobbo believe this long, attempting to guide him to the right conclusion by asking repeatedly, “Do you know me, father?” (*Merchant* 2.2.65). Lancelet’s response to Gobbo’s repeated inability to answer correctly is to plainly state the same conclusion that Chess draws from *2 Henry VI*. He tells him, “if you had your eyes you might fail / of the knowing me: it is a wise father that knows his own son,” recognizing that knowledge does not necessarily follow from seeing, and also that foolishness might be more disabling than blindness (2.2. 67-68). While *Merchant* takes a comic angle, it ultimately accomplishes the same goal, inviting the audience and other characters to reflect on their own relationship with knowledge—intimate knowledge, in this case, rather than scientific. It also demonstrates the failure of embodied or experiential knowledge while also doing the further narrative work of establishing the authenticity of Gobbo’s need. Gobbo asks for Lancelet’s assistance instead of making his own way, and as a consequence is further misled and emotionally exploited for the entertainment of

his son and the audience. Gobbo is a fool as well as blind, and ultimately it is his foolishness, his gullibility, that makes him easy to mock, not his blindness alone.

Furthermore, this exchange between father and son establishes Gobbo's need for care; Gobbo's knowledge cannot, in this case, grow without Lancelot's eventual extension of care. Lancelot has established that his father is well and truly disabled, he needs any assistance that would be offered to him and sets up a narrative expectation that that assistance will be granted. Lancelot does apparently take pity on his father by asking, "do you not know me father?" (*Merchant* 2.2.65). This decision to extend care instead of mockery opens the doors for Gobbo to exercise his embodied knowledge instead of relying on the fallible knowledge of someone who doesn't always have his best interest in mind, initiating a more genuine reciprocal exchange. Gobbo's obtaining of knowledge does not necessarily follow from being told information, either. It takes several more exchanges after the one quoted above before Gobbo finally accepts that Lancelot is his son. This is played as foolishness, but Gobbo's need for confirmation suggests that he has learned a better way to get reliable information from Lancelot, not accepting the relationship until Lancelot connects himself with a relationship that Gobbo is already certain of—his wife Margery. This is something that a stranger, as Lancelot previously claimed to be, would not know (2.2. 80-82). Gobbo fails to operate using a disabled epistemology earlier in the exchange, believing instantly in Lancelot's purported death with no confirmation, but by the end of the exchange he has started believing in a reality that is based not on what he can see or is told, but on what he can test against his lived experience. However, it is important to remember that Gobbo could not access or develop this knowledge without an extension of care from Lancelot. This extension of care levels the playing field for Gobbo and sets the stage for a more reciprocal staring encounter with Bassanio.

Ultimately the problem of Gobbo's disability is resolved not through cure or death, but through charity, echoing the play's thematic concern with issues of money and charity. This charity is an expectation that Lancelet and his father both seem to hold toward Bassanio. When Bassanio enters the scene, both characters display this embodied knowledge by putting Old Gobbo in his path first. "To him father," Lancelet prompts, and Bassanio's immediate response to Gobbo's "God bless your worship" is to ask "wouldst thou aught of me," extending an offer before assistance is asked for (*Merchant* 2.2. 106-108). This exchange, which gives Bassanio an opportunity to display his kindness and charity, is apparently expected by all parties, a surprisingly pre-Reformation social dynamic. According to Row-Heyveld, "disabled people regularly engaged in a mutually beneficial exchange with the normative population. Able-bodied Christians gave them alms (sometimes small, individual sums of money; sometimes shelter, medical treatment, or large endowments continuing in annuity) and, in return, experienced an encounter with the divine facilitated by the disabled person" ("The Lying'st Knave"). Rather than relying on institutions to provide for Gobbo and Lancelet, which according to Row-Heyveld would have been more expected by the early modern period, Bassanio provides for them himself. The implications of this action suggest a different, less Protestant Christian culture in Venice or a possible lampooning of the same (Gobbo's foolishness makes it difficult to conceive of him as a conduit for Christ). Regardless of any religious motivations behind the scene, it accomplishes the same purposes of revealing character and resolving disability. Bassanio gets to be generous to the point of prodigality and Gobbo disappears from the play.

As a blind man, Gobbo has very little in terms of social and physical power, but he's not hung up on it. He easily rolls with the constant adjustments to his sense of reality and turns his disability to his advantage to help his son, making use of Bassanio's offer of charity to secure

Lancelet a job. Both of these qualities are hallmarks of Tobin Sieber's theory of complex embodiment, in which "disability presents as embodied knowledge involving a reciprocal transformation between body and environment" and "disabled people may use to their own advantage the misrepresentations of disability by which they are put at risk of violence and social exclusion" (Siebers 453). We lack textual evidence that Gobbo hams up his performance of blindness for Bassanio as he passes by (stage adaptations of *Merchant* might do so to great effect) but his exchange with Lancelet does essentially this for the audience. Lancelet's "confusions" thoroughly establish the authenticity of his disability—and the extent of his need—which in turn prompts a narrative expectation that said needs will be met. And Gobbo's request that Bassanio hire his son certainly plays on expectations of charity and compassion for the genuinely disabled. He knows what to ask for and how, and Bassanio fills his role in the social contract and gets an opportunity to display his Christian generosity to a member of the "deserving poor." Furthermore, the issue of Gobbo's impairment is resolved. He may remain disabled, but his one and only scene in the play ends with the audience and the characters assured that he will be taken care of. The discomfort his blindness prompts is resolved, and he is returned back to the margins, rendered essentially invisible.

I am not suggesting that we can fully read Gobbo as a nuanced or sympathetic portrayal of the lived experience of blindness. There is certainly an ableist slant, his foolishness makes his own claims of his relationship with his disability and with the world look more like comic misinterpretations of reality, but he is also a better father than the other two fathers in the play, who also fail to know their children. Without seeking to control him, Gobbo both listens to and advocates for son, helping him get a new job with Bassanio, a master that Lancelet prefers to Shylock. Complete knowledge might be outside of his grasp, but he is the only father in the play

that seeks knowledge of his child instead of control, an important distinction. From an ableist perspective, a disability often represents a devastating loss of control, but a more nuanced approach to disability understands it as not necessarily an opportunity—but at the least an occasion for new knowledge that returns some kind of agency to the disabled individual. Additionally, as I will show below through my analysis of *Othello*, Gobbo’s encounters with Lancelet and Bassanio demonstrate the ways in which care facilitates embodied knowledge when disability intersects with class. As a comparison point, it reveals the ways those relationships break down when it is race, and not class, that intersects with disability in *Othello*.

Othello

In *Othello*, the first thing we learn about the titular character is that he Black, and in the process of rebelling against the social boundaries he is expected to stay well within.⁹ His epilepsy is not introduced until much later in the play in a scene that racializes his disability. Because epilepsy is historically connected with both “greatness” and Blackness, it becomes an essential part of his character and an illustration of the reasons for his downfall. At the beginning of the play, Othello is a vulnerable man who has just made himself even more vulnerable by marrying Desdemona, and his fit serves to compound that vulnerability. In fact, this vulnerability is the one thing Gobbo’s encounter with his son and Othello’s encounter with Iago and Cassio have in common. They are both vulnerable, and it is more than the nature of genre that one scene plays for laughs and the other ratchets up the dramatic tension. Both are subject to exploitation based on their physical and social limitations, but where Gobbo is eventually protected and allowed new knowledge by the familial and social bonds designed to protect him, Othello’s multiple

⁹ I will refer to Othello as explicitly Black, rather than simply Other or foreign, in keeping with Ian Smith’s arguments for engaging directly with Othello’s race in “We are Othello.”

vulnerabilities leave him terribly exposed. Accepting a disabled epistemology is not possible for Othello, because, in doing so, the racialized nature of epilepsy would make him more, not less vulnerable.

While there is some critical debate about whether or not Othello's trance can properly be read as an epileptic seizure, several scholars have built a sturdy case backed up on historical medicine and cultural context.¹⁰ By this point, medical understandings of epilepsy had also emerged—including the Galenic understanding of epilepsy as a symptom of a melancholic nature, and the geohumoral pathology argued by Paracelsus. According to Paracelsus, "the pathology of epilepsy must not proceed from human physiology, but first the cosmic phenomenon which corresponds to epilepsy has to be perceived and interpreted, and it will yield an explanation of epilepsy in man" (qtd. in Hobgood). Essentially, epilepsy is a response to some outside stimulus yet to be identified—the weather, the cosmos, something in the air or the food. Both of these definitions work well with what we see of Othello in the text; Hobgood and Schoenfeldt both see evidence of a melancholic nature in Othello and both link epilepsy to that nature (Schoenfeldt 796). But Othello does not show any evidence of this condition until provoked by Iago, as an external trigger of sorts. He falls into a trance because of Iago's "medicine" (*Othello* 4.1.42).

Othello's epileptic fit contains multiple meanings. It is evidence of his heroic nature—the humoral price of genius. At the same time, the unreadable nature of epilepsy, as well as the way it completely takes over the body, is evidence of and a metaphor for Othello's lack of knowledge

¹⁰ For a breakdown of the debate on whether or not Othello should be read as epileptic (and strong defense for reading him as such), see Cazan's "What Shall We Hear of This," especially pages 511-515.

and his loss of control over Desdemona/himself.¹¹ Like Gobbo in *Merchant of Venice*, Othello's disability both limits and changes the way he engages with the world, but Othello's heroic disposition drastically changes the way his disability is represented in the text. In the period, various understandings of epilepsy's meaning and causes were at play. Supernatural and divine associations carried over from the middle ages, and epilepsy was often paradoxically interpreted as either punishment from or communication with God or something magical, associations with the occult that fits with Othello's characterization as a somewhat superstitious foreigner (Hobgood).¹² His epileptic fit, in this case, is evidence of his incomplete assimilation into the white Christian culture, a tangible reminder that he cannot completely suppress his Otherness.

What makes epilepsy so intriguing, on both a medical and metaphorical level, is how easy it is to pass as able-bodied, except for when it isn't. Like madness—another disability regularly associated with a melancholic temperament and the tragic hero—epilepsy is an internal disorder (Row-Heyveld 80). You cannot identify or confirm epilepsy in an individual the same way you might identify blindness or a missing limb or a twisted spine, which means it is both easier to fake and easier to miss. Barring further injury during a fit, it leaves no marks on the body, but epileptic fits are strikingly material in a way that madness is not. According to Hobgood, "Epilepsy's tangible signs — and, even more, the absence of them — might always be misidentified or misread, resulting in an imprecise marking and ineffective disciplining of what was considered to be threatening human variation" (Hobgood). Epilepsy, as something that

¹¹ For more on the connections between *Othello*, tragic heroism, and epilepsy, see See Row-Heyveld's "Antic Dispositions: Mental and Intellectual Disabilities in Early Modern Revenge Tragedy," Hobgood's "Caesar Hath the Falling Sickness: The Legibility of Early Modern Disability in Shakespearean Drama," and Schoenfeldt's "Lessons From the Body: Moralizing Disability."

¹² Also see Cazan and Row-Heyveld.

cannot be treated, cured or even reliably identified means it also cannot be controlled, a connection that reinforces Othello's passionate, superstitious characterization, and Iago's position as a skilled manipulator.

At the same time, epilepsy is a mark of Otherness that comes and goes, thematically similar to Othello's other forms of Otherness in that the degree to which he is Other is always up for debate. How much does his assimilation to a white Christian society balance out his Black, Islamic origins? And how much does his military and leadership prowess balance out the ways in which he emasculates himself in his relationship with Desdemona? In fact, military service was occasionally regarded as treatment for or appropriate avenue through which to channel epilepsy, which suggests that Othello's epilepsy and his deterioration after leaving a combat role are connected (Cazan 508).

The partially invisible nature of epilepsy echoes these other conflicts, but also tips the balance in favor of the Other. Epilepsy's associations with mysticism and magic pull Othello closer to his "savage" origins, and the consistently feminine coding of disabled bodies further emasculates him (Hobgood). All push him further out of his society's control, which, perhaps paradoxically, makes him more vulnerable to Iago's control.

I was initially reluctant to treat Othello's race and his disability as related or the same, because to not separate them is to risk erasure of unique facets of his identity. Treated separately, it may be easier to understand the individual effects of race and disability on Othello. But this attempt to treat these issues as separate proved impossible, because, as Jeffrey Wilson argues, the stigmatized categories are so intertwined that to separate them renders them incomplete and incomprehensible (Wilson). Intersectionality, on the other hand, allows for a treatment of Othello's race and his epilepsy—and the discrimination he is subject to as a result—as

interlocking categories. Othello's race depends on the early modern conception of epilepsy and even more so, the early modern understanding of epilepsy is dependent on the early modern understanding of race. To treat them as separate issues ignores the way they function in Othello's specific society. Humoral medical understandings link Othello's ethnicity and his epilepsy with melancholic temperament (Hobgood). Both are physical signifiers of Othello's Otherness that invite increased scrutiny—a scrutiny that, Akhimie argues, does the real “permanent damage to reputations and to bodies” (Akhimie 53). Furthermore, as Ian Smith argues, responsible scholarship cannot ignore Othello's race or the whiteness that surrounds him. To do so is to be complicit in the marginalization and erasure of Black identity (Smith 121).

Othello's disability and Iago's orchestration of it are inseparable. He prompts the fit, and takes credit for it, but also helps Othello through it, inserting himself into a prosthetic role before Othello can even ask for it. Essentially, Iago makes himself a prosthetic assistant to Othello's disability. According to Nardizzi's work on early modern prosthetic, Iago in this position disables Othello further than he would be if he had never developed an overreliance on Iago's advice (Nardizzi 459). Iago, there to guide Othello through and out of the fit, parodies care by referring to the diet of misinformation and manipulation that he has fed Othello and that prompts Othello's trance as “medicine” (*Othello* 4.1.41). When Othello comes out of the trance, Iago asks further appears to extend care by asking “have you not hurt your head?” before directing the conversation back to Cassio and his supposed betrayal (4.1.57). Iago's false extension of care is just one more way in which he manipulates Othello. Iago's “care” restricts Othello's access to the truth while also solidifying Iago's position as the only reliable source of friendship and knowledge.

While Othello experiences his trance, Iago further establishes himself as the only person Othello can rely on, isolating him from any other avenues of care. Iago dismisses Cassio's attempt at care with his apparent expertise, claiming that the best course of action is to "forbear; / The lethargy must have his quiet course: / If not, he foams at mouth and by and by / Breaks out to savage madness" (*Othello* 4.1.50-53). He also uses the opportunity of Othello's incapacity to set up an incriminating exchange with Cassio. Like Lancelet with Gobbo, Iago exploits Othello under the guise of care, and Othello's reliance makes him more vulnerable, rather than shoring up a weak spot in his abilities. As is consistent with an early modern understanding of prosthesis, to seek prosthetic assistance is to render oneself not necessarily weak, but vulnerable, exposed (Nardizzi 459). As evidenced by these two plays, this is especially true when this prosthetic assistance comes in the form of another human—a human that is fallible at best and lying at worst—instead of an object.

Iago's claim to Cassio that this is Othello's second epileptic fit, that he suffered another one the day before, is meant to foreshadow Othello's descent into madness and murder. Iago here is continuing the work of discrediting Othello, playing on racist stereotypes (he specifically describes Othello's trances as a "savage madness") as well as ableist ones to hint at Othello's instability. It also sets up Iago up as a sort of expert in Othello's disability and makes Othello reliant on Iago in the eyes of Cassio and Othello himself. In knowing about his epilepsy, Iago ties himself even closer to Othello, because he knows something that might discredit Othello as a leader, and he claims knowledge in how to treat that thing. It is just one more example of the ways that Iago is able to control Othello as Othello loses the ability to control himself. Essentially, Othello is no longer able to "pass" without Iago's help, and passing is essential in society in which his position of acceptance and authority is so fragile.

In spite of the fact that he is abled and Othello is disabled, Iago is better able to operate within a disabled epistemology—taking Machiavellian cynicism and the ability to use stereotypes about disability and turning them against Othello. Othello in thinking things should be as they seem, takes it all at face value. In his exchange with Cassio, Iago knows how to make better use of Othello’s own disability than Othello himself does, playing on negative stereotypes about disability to imply that Othello has become weak and unfit. Justin Shaw compares this incident to anatomy theatre, with Iago as the surgeon, Cassio as the audience, and Othello as the corpse. In pushing the responsibility for Othello’s care onto Iago, “the scene gives Cassio that responsibility as he, discomforted by witnessing someone else’s pain, willfully relinquishes to Iago what could otherwise have been an ethical relationship of care. Instead of embracing such discomfort, he retreats and protects himself from both the sight of and proximity to the experience of pain” (Shaw 177). Cassio’s discomfort or indifference then, is at least partially responsible for Iago’s continued manipulation and exploitation of Othello, both falling into the roles that Iago has arranged. Iago’s understanding of disabled epistemologies allows him to exploit the abled lack of understanding or investments in Othello’s need for care. Cassio remains too embedded in an abled epistemology to see Iago’s manipulation of the system.

Othello’s epileptic episode impedes his ability to understand the truth—making him unaware of Iago’s open plotting or Cassio’s intrusion in the middle of the fit—but because Othello doesn’t acknowledge that his understanding is compromised, he cannot find a new avenue for obtaining knowledge. The exploitation of Iago and the indifference of Cassio and everyone else leaves Othello to deal with his epilepsy on his own. Othello himself attempts to diagnose a source for his fit. While he can still speak, he says that “Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus”

(*Othello* 4.1.37-9). In trying to find an explanation for his own extreme physical reaction to his jealousy, Othello blames not his own nature or condition, or Iago for putting the thought in his mind, but Desdemona and Cassio. Essentially, Othello reads a metaphor onto his own body, privileging symbolic meaning over the literal event. In his mind, this fit is evidence of the truth of Iago's actions. In other words, Othello believes his body is reacting this way in order to tell him something important, which is, in a way, an example of complex embodiment. Othello's disabled body *is* attempting to tell him something. Othello uses this fit as an opportunity to adjust his paradigm, to be informed by his body, but comes to the wrong conclusion about the cause of his symptoms because he treats the fit as a prophetic sign to be interpreted rather than an obstacle to knowledge to be accepted then dealt with.

Othello's approach to his own disability is essentially an abled approach, reading his fit for its symbolic possibilities before dealing with the practical effects of that condition on his understanding of reality. His fit leaves him temporarily unaware of what is going on around him; the bad intentions of his caretaker means the gaps in that knowledge will never be accurately filled in. During his trance, Othello is apparently unaware of Iago speaking his schemes out loud or Cassio's appearance in the middle of the fit. Thus, Othello's epileptic episode impedes his ability to understand the truth, but because Othello doesn't acknowledge that his understanding is compromised, he cannot find a new avenue for obtaining knowledge. His overreliance on one source of knowledge (Iago) limits his understanding with disastrous effects. Unlike Gobbo, he remains misled because he fails to adjust to a disabled epistemology.

But even more than his own failure to interrogate Iago's motives, Othello is failed by the indifference of his society. Leaving aside the text suggesting that Iago's resentment about Othello is at least partially founded in race and that Othello's anxiety and willingness to believe

slander about Desdemona is founded on his internalized racism, society's failures of care and Othello's own failure to work with embodied knowledge both stem from his society's racial stereotyping.¹³ Othello has no agency in his staring encounter with Cassio. Cassio's indifference to Othello's fit makes sense given the stereotypical associations of epilepsy with foreignness and melancholy. Othello's fit fits with what Cassio already knows about Othello. He is passionate and "great of heart," and Cassio seems disinclined to intervene when he witnesses Othello's seizure and when he suspects Othello is about to kill himself (5.2.455). In spite of an attempt to intervene when he suggests that Iago "rub him about the temples," stripped of his own authority, Cassio joins Othello in granting more authority to Iago at Othello's expense. As Shaw points out, Cassio "invests more in maintaining socio-cultural hierarchies and proximity to Venetian political power than in caring for Othello's well-being" (175). Ultimately, when Othello breaks down he is acting the way he has always been expected to act because he is foreign and Black, and nobody cares or sees a point in intervening.

Furthermore, this failure of care is entangled with the concept of embodied knowledge. Othello's existence in a racist white society depends on a complex negotiation of when and how he is allowed to display his Otherness, limiting his ability to navigate the world with a disabled epistemology. He shrewdly uses this to his advantage in Act 1.3 when he defends himself from Brabantio's charge of kidnapping Desdemona, but when epilepsy is added to the mix, Othello is caught in a catch-22. Because they are so intertwined, to truly engage with his disability is to engage more fully with his race, to lean harder into stereotypes that associate epilepsy with too much passion and foreignness. To embrace his disability is to become too Black for his society.

¹³ In 3.3.227-74, for example, Iago suggests, and Othello agrees, that Desdemona's attraction to suspicious because of Othello's race and difference from Desdemona.

To play to stereotypes about incapacity like Gobbo does would undermine his authority and exceptionalism, to acknowledge impairment and ask for assistance would only confirm racist and xenophobic ideas about Blackness. Consequently, any knowledge that Othello could use to help him work with his epilepsy is inaccessible to him. He is barred from both developing and making use of a disabled epistemology.

Where Gobbo performing his disability makes him more acceptable and grants him access to care, Othello doing the same makes him less acceptable, renders him less comprehensible. But in ignoring that disability and relying on Iago's knowledge instead of his own, Othello opens himself up to exploitation and mistreatment. Othello makes the wrong decision, but there was never really a right one. And while there is little textual evidence to indicate Othello consciously makes this decision, the ties between Othello's struggle to question himself and internalized racism have been well noted in the work of Ian Smith, Janet Adelman, and others. Smith notes that "Othello's embarrassed confession of blackness as a stigmatized identity coincides with Iago's growing control over his black victim's self-perception, thus reinforcing the dynamic of power between white mastery and racialized blackness that degrades black persons at every level of social interaction" (110). It's a dynamic that plays out similarly to the relationship between Iago, Othello, and epilepsy. Othello is not allowed to understand himself because his world can neither understand him, nor allow him to understand himself. He has little space to explore or create his own identity.

Conclusions

Unlike Gobbo, Othello's disability must be resolved narratively with death because there was never an appropriate place in society for him. Because Othello is able to work, he is not eligible for charity, and given his more elevated economic status, wouldn't find much use in it.

Care, for him, can only be accessed more informally through his social bonds with his comrades—a precarious situation, given that Iago is malicious and Cassio indifferent. Othello's disability functions as a social impairment in a social world in which he is already at a disadvantage. The only options available for resolving his disability are a cure or death, and nobody in his society is all that interested in attempting a cure.

The Merchant of Venice and *Othello* share a key theme that makes a reading of both of them together useful. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare's oft revisited exploration of knowledge creeps in around the edges, especially when it comes to familial relationships. And knowledge takes center stage in *Othello*, which explores the disastrous consequences of Othello's failure to interrogate where he gets his knowledge and how he responds to what he thinks he knows. Disability, in both cases, plays a key role in the way Shakespeare writes about epistemology, ultimately revealing that a disabled epistemology is often times more useful than an abled one, regardless of whether or not the character making use of that epistemology is disabled. While often played to add comedy or dramatic power to a scene, the presence of these characters also suggest that Shakespeare was curious and thinking about the realities and intersections of a disabled life.

When that disability also produces a class difference by limiting a person's ability to work, that discomfort can be worked through with formal charity. Financially cared for, Gobbo can move out of abled sight and mind, no longer a concern. But there is no model for how to extend care when the need exists on a social/racial plane rather than class. In *Othello*, epilepsy's ties to his race make him, in a sense, incurable. Racist assumptions about his disposition and ambivalence about his position within his society make him an outsider, leaving him without access to formal or informal care. Instead, he is subject to racist surveillance, indifference,

aggression, and eventually death. To be disabled is to juggle both assimilation and performance, a balancing act that becomes increasingly more complex when race and class intersect. Narrative prosthesis may be a theoretical tool we use to understand disability narratives, but its ubiquity suggests something about the reality of disability and the epistemological concerns of care. Real care is open-ended, dependent on individual needs, personal relationships, and a high level of awareness. As such, it is not the most satisfying resolution to the discomfort that disability provokes in both narrative and real-world disability encounters, but it is necessary for ethical engagement with disability. Care depends on attention and reciprocity, insists that disabled individuals not be treated as passive objects when present and invisible when not.

Just as no two experiences with disability are alike, no two disabled epistemologies are going to be the same, which is why my conclusions on this topic are by no means complete. Questions of gender, sexuality and class in these plays interact with disability in fascinating ways. They have a powerful impact on how these disabilities are perceived from the outside, and how disabled epistemologies are constructed from the inside. Also complicating things are issues of performance. How Othello and Gobbo are portrayed onstage can simplify or complicate the presentation of disability in the text. Should Gobbo and Othello be portrayed by disabled actors? How much does Gobbo “crip up” for Lancelet or Bassanio? How dramatic is Othello’s “trance”? Does Cassio react with discomfort or compassion to Othello’s seizure? On a stage, these staring encounters become more complex and more concrete and open up opportunities for real staring encounters between actors and audience. Academic ethical staring at the text can open up the possibilities not just for historical understanding of disability, but for thoughtful, relevant, nuanced contemporary performances. By ethically engaging with disability in Shakespeare’s work, we can further understand its intersectional nature, not only with other marginalized

groups, but with issues of knowledge and social support that will never fully go away until we embrace disabled epistemologies.

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