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Richard III, *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Elephant Man*, *Children of a Lesser God*, and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* are all examples of plays in which disabled characters play prominent roles. But, as James MacDonald notes in his introduction to the last play of this collection, *Cripplegate*, "[p]lays about disability by disabled authors have been few and relatively unheralded" (p. 187). MacDonald's lived experience as a disabled person is disclosed in the collection's foreword; and it is this disclosure, in combination with MacDonald's framing of disability in his plays, that distinctly set *Four Plays about Disability* apart from some of the more well-known plays above that rely on disabled characters–and, importantly, tropes about disability–to move their stories forward.

The full title of MacDonald's collection is *Four Plays about Disability: Agency*. The subtitle is of particular concern for readers to understand, according to MacDonald: '"Agency' is a critical term in discussions of social inclusion. Agency signifies acceptance, recognition, empowerment. My plays in general examine the lives of people with disabilities in pursuit of their quest for agency" (p. xi). *Wellclose Square*, *Unsex Me Here*, *Gnarled*, and *Cripplegate* are exercises in this idea, inviting readers to locate new understandings of disability through increasingly complex historical, social, and political situations. Michael Bérubé (2005) theorized "disability as motive….as the condition for possibility for the text and its apprehension by readers" (p. Kindle Location 1116). MacDonald says something similar about how he utilizes disability in his plays, as "disability pivots the drama" (p. xi). In these plays, disability does not

exist as what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2001) would call narrative prosthesis, but rather, to highlight the choices and actions that characters make in these specific historical, social, and political situations in response to disability, and more specifically, disabled people and their perceived or actualized agency.

Wellclose Square is a reimagining of the Whitechapel Murders. According to MacDonald, "In 1888, when the play is set, [Wellclose Square] was a Jewish enclave featuring a cross-section of Jewish immigrants" (p. 1). The exposition of the play makes it clear that this privileged neighborhood is an anomaly–it is surrounded by crime, brothels, ruffians, etc. So, naturally, when a new immigrant, Tsilla Zingerman, arrives looking to find a relative on the Square, everyone is suspicious of her intentions. Act One concludes with her murder–which makes sense based on the premise of the play. But more interestingly, her murder is prophesied by Joseph Shreda, a disabled person in the care of the local shaman, Ezekiel Sue. Joseph appears on stage in a wheelchair and usually is quoting scripture or prophesying things to come. Ezekiel Sue trusts these proclamations and on more than one occasion, vouches for Joseph's "intuition." While some mentions of Joseph's sexual capabilities are made in *Wellclose Square*, this is not the goal of his inclusion as a character in the play.

In Act Two of Wellclose Square, we are introduced to a character named Clare, who is also disabled and is revealed to be of British Royal heritage. Clare is in the care of William Yarborough, a Royal physician. There are strong parallels between Joseph and Sue's relationship and that of Clare's and Yarborough's, as MacDonald explores how Sue and Yarborough approach disability differently, and thus, arrive at very different decisions at a key moment in the play. Sue supports Joseph and respects him; the same can be said of the Wellclose Square community. In contrast, Yarborough chastises, humiliates, and experiments on Clare to remove

Clare's disability altogether. Similarly, Yarborough's penchant for eugenics underscores the already high racial tension and prejudice in the text, while Sue's efforts to hold the community together are presented as being far more inclusive. As such, disability agency functions in *Wellclose Square* through one character's autonomy and lived experiences being validated by a more influential, able-bodied character while the other prominent disabled character is denied these opportunities at every turn. Thematically, pairing *Wellclose Square* and *Unsex Me Here* works extremely well to begin discussions on the prevalence of eugenics and how eugenicism has fueled systematic oppression, which is the gist of the closing of the play, as the Rabbi implores the audience to consider the consequences of such ideologies.

Unsex Me Here examines how nurses of the Hadamar Institute in Nazi Germany carried out the systematic killing of disabled children. The play is set in a futuristic kind of museum in which realistic holograms are invited to speak to their past lives' experiences. Most of the characters in this play, therefore, are based on real-life people who worked in this Institute, or in some cases, such as Clothilde Elfriede, were patients of what became the Hadamar Institute in later years. All of MacDonald's plays in this collection have at least one moment in each of them when the fourth wall is broken, and the audience is addressed by a character directly. However, *Unsex Me Here* has multiple moments in which the audience is directly addressed; the play even goes as far as to functionally include the audience as the "tour group" that is moving through the exhibit. This is a unique feature, one that is almost Brechtian in nature. Through this interactivity between characters on stage and the audience, MacDonald creates a theatrical experience that exploits this relationship to bring about maximum emotional impact as the play moves along.

Unsex Me Here begins with three narrators, one of whom is disabled. As the play does not shy away from the details of Nazi Germany's fascination with, and implementation of,

sterilization and euthanasia of disabled people–especially disabled children, this narrator's positionality is used primarily to serve as a reminder that disabled bodies have endured. The other use of this narrator in Act One is also to draw attention to disability in other contexts–such as in America during the same time period–that resemble the issue at hand: eugenics, a topic that MacDonald also explores in *Wellclose Square*. This narrator does not appear in Act Two; in fact, all three narrators that begin the play are replaced by one, the latter remarking "They were somewhat overwhelmed by the vividness of the exhibits, and we are entering the critical phase" (p. 114). This statement is warranted, as the second act increases the number of dramatized procedures to sterilize and exterminate disabled bodies that appear on stage. Because the focus is on the nurses and other perpetrators of these crimes in the play, it is difficult, at times, to understand how MacDonald is using disability to "pivot the drama." *Unsex Me Here* is certainly educational in illuminating the complicity of medical professionals, and other individuals, in these killings. Still, the repeated imagery of disabled bodies locked up in cages, or tied to beds, or literally being killed on stage almost completely undoes MacDonald's central aim of exploring, and uplifting, disability agency. The connection to agency in *Unsex Me Here*, then, is perhaps not about *disabled* agency, but rather, *able-bodied* agency, and the power that able-bodied individuals have always held and sought to maintain over disabled bodies.

Gnarled is a fictitious account of the real life of Mary Hughes Yarwood (1809-1890), who was a disabled woman living in Victorian England. This play builds on the conversation about disability that MacDonald has initiated in *Wellclose Square* and *Unsex Me Here* to hone in on the interplay between disability, sex, and agency. Specifically, MacDonald focuses on Magda's control of her sexual agency in opposition to other character's attempts to limit it, oscillating between Magda's memories and the present, in which she is on trial for being a

prostitute and running a brothel. The real-life inspiration for this work, Mary Hughes Yarwood was rather successful in both of these endeavors. MacDonald also notes that in addition to being a successful brothel owner and prostitute, Mary also was happily married and mother to two children.

We get glimpses of the family that Mary had through Magda's romance and relationship with Jack. Jack is important to mention because Jack and the priest-like character Waller are the only two characters in the play to support and bolster Magda's agency (sexual and otherwise). Yet, while Magda is on trial for being a prostitute, other characters such as Briana are shown to be exerting their sexual agency in the same, or more aggressive, ways and those characters end up with no consequences. Of course, it should be noted that at the trial, Briana is nowhere to be found, and a mention is made that she might even be dead. But as this is never confirmed in the text, it is therefore an interesting juxtaposition to consider: Who has agency over their bodies? And to do what with them? These are the questions at the heart of *Gnarled*. Because disabled people have been historically denied agency over their own bodies, as *Unsex Me Here* chronicles in gruesome detail, it comes as no shock that the play's conclusion shows Magda locked alone in a jail cell, while others continue to engage in the same kinds of sexual activity that Magda is in prison for.

Cripplegate takes us to more modern times, and to a more autobiographical space, in its portrayal of caregiving relationships and immigration. MacDonald notes that this play resembles his own life, and that is evident to see as the drama unfolds (p. 187). The play centers on Jamie, a disabled academic, and his new bride, Nina, as they try to build a life together. *Cripplegate*, in a much more explicit fashion than *Wellclose Square*, discusses the intricacies of belonging to a new place and to a new person whose needs are different from your own. Nina's arc in the play

is about coming to terms with the fact that she successfully passed the immigration hearing, allowing her to reside in a country where she knows only Jamie, whose disability makes her his near full-time caregiver. As the play progresses, however, Nina starts to build a community in England through fellow Russian immigrants and begins to open up to them about her life and her fears for her family back home. This progression is highly contrasted with Jamie's near static position in the play. For much of *Cripplegate*, Jamie is working through how he expresses his emotions to (and for) Nina, as he has never been in such a relationship before. Disability agency is therefore explored in *Cripplegate* through Nina and Jamie's caregiving relationship.

Nina and Jamie's relationship is presented as it is: it is full of struggle, barriers, and miscommunications in both caregiving and romantic situations. Importantly, the struggle to communicate is common ground for both characters, and each takes turns trying to get the other to understand what they are saying. While many of Jamie's care needs are physical, Nina demonstrates throughout the text that her care needs are more emotional. *Cripplegate* constantly reminds the reader that while this relationship is equal in this aspect of Nina and Jamie's lives, disability upends that illusion of equality. Nel Nodding's' ethics of care (1984, 2013) points to similar thoughts in expressing how care encounters function and what it means to be the one-caring and one-cared-for. Jamie will always be the one cared for, with Nina being the carer. This power imbalance becomes heightened in the play by the fact that Jamie's lodging and income is directly tied to his disability, even though he holds an advanced degree. MacDonald makes sure that readers understand a similar truth exists for Nina, as she is an immigrant holding an advanced degree in engineering, but cannot find work due to her immigrant status. In *Cripplegate*, the theme of agency begins to squarely break away from "disabled agency,"

focusing instead on how the opportunities and capacity for agential action exist through connection with others who may be similar or dissimilar to us.

This collection is a valuable addition to drama and theater studies. The plays are well-constructed and allow for a complex reading of disability to be gained from their contents, as disability is shown to be inextricably linked to race, gender, sex, and socio-economic status, among other issues. However, as a Shakespeare professor once said to me, plays are always meant to be performed. Casting disabled actors in performances of MacDonald's plays should be a primary focus of any educator, director, or anyone else in charge of producing such a show. MacDonald notes that "As part of their research, the actors portraying disabled characters were instructed to choose a disability and then to rehearse how to 'live disabled'" (p. 71). Disabled mimicry, and the larger issue of able-bodied and neurotypical actors being cast in disabled and neurodivergent roles, remains prevalent in theater and other entertainment industries. These plays, as the foreword and acknowledgement sections of the collection make clear, were written for educational purposes and performed by students studying theater and drama. If *educating* about disability is the aim of these plays, then disabled actors should helm most of the roles therein. Furthermore, performances of *Four Plays* ought to also be attentive toward making the worlds of each play as racially inclusive as possible. *Wellclose Square* is the play that best speaks to racial discrimination, however, each of these plays offers opportunities for non-white actors (and non-white, disabled actors at that) to be onstage in these roles. Disability representation is often skewed towards a version that promotes white, male, disabled bodies– there are opportunities to change that within *Four Plays*.

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