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Reading the “human braille”: Discourses of Ableism and Medievalism in the Reburial of Richard III

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*Hi eodon þa secende ealle endemes to þam wuda. secende gehwær geond
þyfelas and bremelas gif hi a-hwær mihton gemeton þæt heafod. [. . .] Hi
eodon þa secende. and symle clypigende. swa swa hit gewunelic is þam ðe
on wuda gað oft. Hwær eart þu nu gefera? and him andwyrde þæt heafod.
Hér. hér. hér. and swa gelome clypode andswarigende him eallum. swa oft
swa heora ænig clypode. oppæt hi ealle becomen þurh ða clypunga him to.*

*Then, at last, they all went searching into the wood, looking everywhere
through thickets and brambles, [to see] if they might come upon the head
anywhere. [. . .] They went on seeking, and always crying out, as is usual
for those who often go walking in the woods, “Where are you now,
comrade?”, and the head answered them, “Here! Here! Here!”, and so it
cried out over and over, answering them all as often as any of them called
out, until they all came to him.¹*

- Ælfric of Eynsham, “Life of St Edmund”

At the end of Ælfric’s eleventh-century Life of St Edmund, a royal corpse speaks. After the strange dialogue quoted here, King Edmund’s head, tossed into the brambles by his Viking murderers, is discovered by his loyal subjects between the paws of a wolf. The head is then reattached to the body, with only a red line marking the neck at the point where it was severed, and Edmund is promptly and splendidly laid to rest.² Throughout the story, Edmund’s body perfectly fulfils his subjects’ expectations and demands: it answers when they call, and reassembles at their touch. It is a *convenient* corpse, summoning its seekers, knitting itself into a relic that will endure for generations, the red line at the neck signalling the body’s miraculous wholeness. Modern archaeologists would be lucky to find an artefact that better answers the present’s questing after history.

Yet recent British history provides us with another example of a kingly corpse excavated in astonishing circumstances. The body of King Richard III was discovered in a Leicester carpark in 2012, more than five centuries after his 1485 death at the Battle of Bosworth. Richard’s excavation and eventual reinterment at Leicester Cathedral in 2015 made for a remarkable story. The find, long considered unlikely, struck the public imagination: 20,000 people gathered in Leicester over three days in 2015 to see Richard’s coffin. This turnout, to quote Channel Four newscaster Jon Snow, “show[ed] how keen we are on our

¹ Ælfric of Eynsham, “Life of St Edmund,” in *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, vol. 2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & co., 1900), 314-335, 324. Translation is the author’s own.

² Ælfric of Eynsham, “Life of St Edmund,” 324-6.

history”—by “we” presumably meaning “the British,” or perhaps “the English.”³ A medieval monarch reburied in the heart of his former “kingdom” might appear to be a speaking corpse on par with Edmund’s, a relic “announcing” its identity under scientific scrutiny. A poem read at the reinterment ceremony by a distant relative of Richard III, the actor Benedict Cumberbatch, uses precisely this rhetoric of the body as communicative, legible: Richard’s bones are “scripted in light, upon cold soil, / a human braille.”⁴

One part of this “human braille,” however, resisted clear reading: namely, Richard’s spine. After centuries of dehumanising and disputed characterisations of the king as a “hunchback,” the exhumation revealed that Richard had idiopathic scoliosis, with a 70-90° curvature of the spine.⁵ This article focuses on that discovery, and the discourses of “disability” and “deformity” that sprung up around it. It explores how the uncovered corpse’s spine figured in perceptions of Richard as an archetypally “medieval” king—even, for some, “the last medieval king of England.” Unlike Edmund’s divided body, miraculously restored to wholeness in his subjects’ hands, Richard’s skeleton produced an irreconcilable split in popular images of the monarch. Some insisted on seeing Richard as a “warrior-king,” a noble fighter in whose body no physical difference or impairment could be admitted.⁶ Others took the spine as confirmation of a deforming “hunchback,” long stereotypically associated with villainy and tragedy. These corporeal fantasies loosely align with two of Umberto Eco’s famous “ten little Middle Ages”: one, a medievalism of “national identities,” valorising the king and his age in a “celebration of past grandeur”; the other, a “barbaric” or “shaggy” medievalism, promoting Richard’s body as emblematic of medieval grimness and grotesquery.⁷

Neither construction takes Richard’s body on its own terms. Instead, both warp its image into conformity with preconceived notions about our medieval history, transforming

³ *Richard III: The Burial of the King*, directed by Bridget Caldwell and James Morgan, aired March 26, 2015, on Channel Four Television Corporation Limited; *The King Laid to Rest*, directed by Bridget Caldwell and James Morgan, aired March 26, 2015, on Channel Four. Quoted in Anne E. Bailey, “Anthropology, the Medievalist... and Richard III,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 41 (2015): 27-51, 29.

⁴ Carol Ann Duffy, “Richard,” *The Guardian*, March 26, 2015, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/26/richard-iii-by-carol-ann-duffy>.

⁵ Jo Appleby et al., “The Scoliosis of Richard III, Last Plantagenet King of England: Diagnosis and Clinical Significance,” *Lancet* 383 (2014): 1944.

⁶ Many of this essay’s modern sources use terms like “impairment” and “disability” interchangeably. When not quoting directly from such sources, I broadly seek to follow the distinction used by Tory Pearman and other disability studies scholars, whereby “disability” refers to “people whose physical or mental faculties do not adhere to the sociocultural norms of their historically located societies,” and “impairment” refers “specifically [to] the bodily or mental faculty without regard to its social connotations.” See Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

⁷ Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), 69-70.

Richard's physical difference into a malleable object of discourse. Analysing how Richard's corpse was made to "answer" to twenty-first century desires illuminates not only the fraught relationship between our present and the unearthed medieval past, but also the ableist distortions to which different and disabled bodies throughout history have been subjected—and continue to be subjected today.

Context

Before considering medievalist constructions of Richard's body, we must first locate them in the discovery's context. The 2012 Leicester exhumation, carried out by University of Leicester archaeologists, followed a search initiated by the Richard III Society under the banner of the *Looking for Richard Project*, led by writer Phillipa Langley. The Society is a Ricardian organisation, dedicated to finding the "truth" about Richard and securing a "reassessment" of the "traditional accounts," many influenced by Shakespeare's famous portrayal in *Richard III*, that characterise Richard as a "hunchbacked" child-killer.⁸ The find of the "Carpark King" swiftly became a media sensation: aspects of the process, like the locating of a matrilineally descended DNA match for Richard and the controversy over whether the king's bones should be interred in York or Leicester, regularly made national and international headlines.⁹ Publicity continued beyond the reinterment, with ongoing media interest in the possibility of sequencing Richard's genome.¹⁰

Two recurring aspects of the media coverage are particularly striking. The first is the repeated emphasis on Richard as a specifically, even superlatively, *medieval* monarch. British media and archaeological reports branded him "the last medieval king of England," "the most notorious medieval king," or "the most familiar medieval king." Such terms often appear in conjunction with descriptions of Richard as the "last English king to die in battle," though this was hardly a common cause of death for medieval monarchs.¹¹ Ricardian

⁸ "About Us," *The Richard III Society*, March 15, 2006, accessed January 10, 2022, <http://www.richardiii.net/aboutus.php>.

⁹ See, in the Canadian press, Randy Boswell, "Canadian Family Holds Genetic Key to Richard III puzzle," *Postmedia*, August 27, 2012, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120831071828/http://www.canada.com/technology/Canadian+family+holds+genetic+Richard+puzzle/7151179/story.html>; in the British press, see John Murray, "Tug-of-war Brews Over 'king in car park'," *Financial Times*, February 3, 2013, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/4a7290da-6e2b-11e2-983d-00144feab49a>.

¹⁰ See Richard Toon and Laurie Stone, "A Game of Thrones: Richard III and the Creation of Cultural Heritage," in *Studies in Forensic Biohistory: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Christopher M. Stojanowski and William M. Duncan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 43-66, 56.

¹¹ For uses in archaeological reports, see Matthew Morris and Richard Buckley, *Richard III: The King Under the Car Park* (Leicester: University of Leicester Archaeological Society, 2013), 7; and Richard Buckley et al., "'The king in the car park': New Light on the Death and Burial of Richard III in the Grey Friars Church, Leicester, in 1485," *Antiquity* 87, no. 336 (2013): 519-38, 520. For uses in documentaries, see *Richard III: The New Evidence*, directed by Gary Johnstone, aired August 17, 2014, Channel Four,

interest groups, too, centred Richard's medieval identity. The Plantagenet Alliance, a group of campaigners claiming descent from Richard, stressed that it was the wish "of the last medieval king of England" that he rest in York.¹² Philippa Langley's account of the discovery, co-authored by Michael Jones, likewise begins by describing the Battle of Bosworth as marking "the ending of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era."¹³ Though medievalists might balk at such rigid assertions of period boundaries, the idea remains important in the popular imagination. Richard's body, in these accounts, operates as a hinge at the border of Tudor modernity, a vantage point from which the present can peer into the medieval past.

The second is contemporary reportage's focus on Richard's spine. The discovery of Richard's scoliosis transfixed the onlooking public with an apparent fascination of horror that often centred around the perceived grotesqueness of his physical difference. One photograph of Richard's skeleton, the head twisted at an angle that highlighted the spinal curve, was published repeatedly in news outlets.¹⁴ Descriptions of the skeleton emphasised viewers' perceptions of its abnormality: it was "twisted and traumatised," "weirdly curved in a ghastly S."¹⁵ The spine's potency as an image was reflected in a 2016 Almeida Theatre *Richard III* production, which opened with a set-piece that referenced the excavation. Figures in forensic suits lifted a curved spine from a pit, while radio reports of an "extraordinary discovery" played—the conjunction of the stage action and the audio implying that *extraordinary discovery* could be specifically describing the spine.¹⁶

43:20-43:28. For news headlines, see Tom Rowley, "Richard III Burial: Five Centuries On, the Last Medieval King Finally Gains Honour in Death", *The Daily Telegraph*, March 23, 2015, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/environment/archaeology/11489187/Richard-III-burial-five-centuries-on-the-last-medieval-king-finally-gains-honour-in-death.html>; "Richard III – The Last King to Die in Battle", *The Daily Telegraph*, September 26, 2020, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220317162308/https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/tours/partners/travel-editions/richard-iii-last-king-die-in-battle/>. On rates of violent deaths for medieval European monarchs, see Manuel Eisner, "Killing Kings: Patterns of Regicide in Europe, AD 600-1800," *The British Journal of Criminology* 51, no. 3 (2011): 556-577.

¹² Caroline Davies, "Richard III's Descendants Lose Battle Over Reburial in Leicester," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2014, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/23/richard-iii-relatives-reburial-remains-leicester>.

¹³ Philippa Langley and Michael Jones, *The King's Grave: The Search for Richard III* (London: John Murray, 2013), 7.

¹⁴ Lindsey Row-Heyveld, *Disassembling Disability in Early Modern English Drama* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 136.

¹⁵ Davies, "Richard III's Descendants Lose Battle"; Stephen Greenblatt, "The Shape of a Life," *The New Yorker*, February 5, 2013, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-shape-of-a-life>.

¹⁶ Paul Taylor, "Richard III, Almeida, London, Theatre Review," *The Independent*, June 17, 2016, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre->

Notably, despite media furore over whether or not the skeleton confirmed Richard's supposed "hunchback," it is difficult to determine exactly how Richard would have experienced life with scoliosis. Forensics generally indicate that the condition may have raised one of Richard's shoulders higher than the other, but this would not otherwise have been readily discernible except in certain bent postures. Whether Richard would have suffered pain or other impairment due to his scoliosis also remains unclear.¹⁷ This bioarchaeological complexity, however, was erased in popular discourse, in favour of the distorted characterisations introduced above: Richard as invulnerable warrior-king, and Richard as grotesque spectacle of deformity.

Richard as Medieval Warrior-King

Responses to the excavation that characterised Richard as a warrior-king asserted the monarch's corporeal wholeness, might, and masculinity. An egregious 2018 *Daily Mail* headline responding to a facial reconstruction epitomises the regal aesthetic envisaged for the king: "King Richard III was not a grotesque hunchback but actually a handsome gentleman with a 'surf dude' vibe, experts say."¹⁸ Such characterisations struggled to accommodate the fact of Richard's spinal curvature. For many in the Richard III Society, including Langley, Richard's "hunchback" was a slanderous Tudor invention, and the confirmation of his scoliosis was a blow—even, for Langley, a "personal [. . .] disaster."¹⁹ The excavation forced Langley and the Society to shift tack, from denying any spinal difference, to insisting that scoliosis would not have actually impaired the royal body. Langley's excavation account describes scoliosis as a "condition, not a disability," while the Society's website stresses the fact that the athlete Usain Bolt also has scoliosis to demonstrate that it "doesn't necessarily limit physical capability."²⁰ This strategy recalls a

[dance/reviews/richard-iii-almeida-london-theatre-review-ralph-fiennes-s-richard-is-full-of-misanthropic-disdain-a7085976.html](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/nov/21/dance/reviews/richard-iii-almeida-london-theatre-review-ralph-fiennes-s-richard-is-full-of-misanthropic-disdain-a7085976.html).

¹⁷ Appleby et al., "The Scoliosis of Richard III"; Jo Appleby, "Osteobiographies: Local Biologies, Embedded Bodies, and Relational Persons," *Bioarchaeology International* 3, no. 1 (2019): 32-43; Mary Ann Lund, "Richard's Back: Death, Scoliosis and Myth Making," *Medical Humanities* 41 (2015): 89-94; The Greyfriars Research Team with Maev Kennedy and Lin Foxhall, *The Bones of a King: Richard III Rediscovered* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 72.

¹⁸ Phoebe Weston, *MailOnline*, November 21, 2018, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-6413799/King-Richard-III-not-grotesque-hunchback-actually-handsome-gentleman.html>.

¹⁹ Mike Pitts, *Digging for Richard: How Archaeology Found the King* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), eBook, loc. 2042. For more on Langley's personal disappointment regarding the revelation of Richard's "deformity," see Marcela Kostihova, "Digging for Perfection: Discourse of Deformity in Richard III's Excavation," *Palgrave Communications* 2 (2016): 1-5, 3.

²⁰ Langley and Jones, *The King's Grave*, 135; The Richard III Society, "His Appearance," January 20, 2019, accessed January 10, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220305041000/http://www.richardiii.net/2_4_0_riii_appearance.php.

line from Josephine Tey's 1951 Ricardian novel *The Daughter of Time*, in which a detective investigating the murder of the Princes in the Tower speaks to an expert who claims Richard had "no visible deformity. At least, none that mattered."²¹ Deformity, disability: all must be minimized, framed as "not matter[ing]," if this Richard is to be claimed by the Ricardians.

The "condition, not disability" claim is dubious. People with scoliosis report varying levels of pain and debility, and, as I have argued already, Richard's lived experience of scoliosis cannot be determined from the excavation's evidence.²² Even were this knowledge accessible, however, attempts to definitively label Richard as dis/abled are necessarily flawed. Many modern disability activists and theorists do not regard "disability" as a fixed, bounded category, but rather a lens through which to view what Eli Clare terms "the material and social conditions that restrict people with impairments."²³ Moreover, as scholars of medieval disability have demonstrated, our modern categories of "disabilities" and "conditions" cannot easily map onto actual medieval bodies or their social experiences.²⁴ The Society was unconcerned with these realities, however: as Sonya Freeman Loftis writes, their "denial of [Richard's] disability" became a firmly embedded strategy in their wider "denial of [his] villainy."²⁵

More than Richard's moral reputation is at stake in the Society's engagement with his skeleton. The Ricardians' resistance to the idea of a physically impaired Richard relates to an anxiety that a disabled or visibly "othered" royal body would be incompatible with their perceptions of medieval English kingship as muscular, masculine, warlike. Langley's excavation account characterises Richard and his "era" in terms inflected by nostalgic, romantic medievalism. If Richard was ever harsh, this was simply a product of his being a prince in a "ruthless era;" these qualities, moreover, were balanced out by his considerable martial "fortitude" and "chivalry."²⁶ The Society's Richard is a knight, a pseudo-Arthurian defender of the realm—perhaps, recalling the popular emphasis on Richard's death in battle, the last real fighting English king. Meanwhile, another excavation account by Mike Pitts describes the Society's mission with a metaphor linking

²¹ Josephine Tey, *The Daughter of Time* (New York: Scribner, 2020), 98.

²² Frank Schwab et al., "A Clinical Impact Classification of Scoliosis in the Adult," *Spine* 31, no. 8 (2006): 2109-2114.

²³ Eli Clare and Kelly Fritsch, "Resisting Easy Answers: An Interview with Eli Clare," *Upping the Anti* 9 (2009), accessed January 10, 2022, <https://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/09-resisting-easy-answers/>.

²⁴ Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5; Richard H. Godden and Asa Simon Mittman, Introduction to *Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3-31, 6.

²⁵ Sonya Freeman Loftis, *Shakespeare and Disability Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 21.

²⁶ Langley and Jones, *The King's Grave*, 54; 143.

medieval kingship and corporeal perfectibility: “through a form of sympathy like the medieval healing ritual of royal ‘touching,’ it would prove possible to cure the world of the myth of Richard the Bad.”²⁷

Richard’s curved spine was a source of repulsion and incredulity for the Society. It could not be accommodated in their constructions of his identity as a medieval monarch. At one point in *Richard III: The New Evidence*, the second of three widely viewed Channel Four documentaries chronicling the excavation, Langley bends down to the skeleton and says “How do you get armour on *that?*”—“that” being Richard’s spine.²⁸ Her deictic focus on the spine others it, magnifies it, and segments it from the body as a whole. Richard’s physical difference prevents her from picturing the skeleton before her as she *wants* to picture it—as a knight riding resplendently into battle. Indeed, the whole documentary, which focused on the emerging scientific revelations about Richard’s body, presents the idea of Richard’s impairment with horrified intrigue. A voiceover announcing that Richard may have had osteoarthritis is accompanied by ominous, horror-film-style underscoring.²⁹ Meanwhile, the documentary’s interviewees reiterate the equation of medieval kingship with corporeal strength: the historian Ian Mortimer announces confidently that sovereignty in the period was “a matter of might is right.”³⁰

The documentary uses a modern body-double, Dominic Smee, to “test” whether Richard could have fought on horseback. Smee has a near-identical spinal curvature to Richard, and trained in sword-fighting and horse-riding for the purpose. Despite obvious discrepancies between Smee and Richard—Smee grew up with access to modern nutrition and medicine, and has neither the osteoarthritis nor the roundworm infection from which Richard apparently suffered—the documentary continually asserts a one-to-one correspondence between their bodies through time. “If Dominic can do this then I’m sure Richard could have managed,” says forensic expert Piers Mitchell.³¹

As it turns out, Dominic *can* do it, as is demonstrated in triumphant shots of Smee, in gleaming period-typical armour, driving lances through targets and sitting proudly on a horse. The analogy with Smee’s modern body “proves” Richard to not have been disabled—or at least, recalling Tey’s formulation, “not in any way that mattered.”³²

²⁷ Pitts, *Digging for Richard*, loc. 1190.

²⁸ *The New Evidence*, Channel Four, 19:50. The first documentary, *Richard III: The King in the Car Park*, attracted 3.7 million viewers. See John Plunkett, “Richard III Documentary Proves a King-Size Hit for Channel 4,” *The Guardian*, February 5, 2013, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/feb/05/richard-third-channel-4-rv-ratings>.

²⁹ *The New Evidence*, 5:56.

³⁰ *The New Evidence*, 11:38.

³¹ *The New Evidence*, 10:56.

³² Tey, *The Daughter of Time*, 98.

Instead, the documentary hypothesises that if Richard *did* experience difficulties in battle, they were related to a much more palatable hazard of medieval kingship: gluttony. Isometric analysis showing Richard's high meat and wine consumption before his death is used to paint a picture of the king as "dissolute, but not disabled," "a hard drinker, and a big eater, but a skilled fighter."³³ Such language could describe any of the jolly, Falstaffian monarchs depicted in medievalism-inflected popular culture, like Robert Baratheon in *Game of Thrones*.³⁴ The idea of a monarch living with perceived physical difference or potentially disabling pain is securely rejected. In its place, the documentary paints a picture that associates Richard with potentially damaging excess—but also with wealth, a virile appetite, and a forceful physicality befitting its normative ideal of a medieval warrior-king.

Richard as Medieval Grotesque

This was not, however, the only perspective on Richard's spine circulating in popular discourse. Others took Richard's scoliosis as *proof* of a historical "hunchback," using this as fodder for broader constructions of medieval bodies as deviant, ailing, grotesque. These competing constructions collide in Pitts' excavation account. When Langley is first told about the excavated skeleton's spinal curve, she offers a stark refusal: "No. [. . .] No." To which an archaeologist responds, "Well, we don't know for sure [. . .] there would have been plenty of hunchbacks."³⁵ Langley's disbelief at the idea of a medieval king with a spinal curve meets the archaeologist's vision of Richard's medieval world as a place *full* of "hunchbacks," of othered bodies existing in a context characterised by heightened bodily suffering. Both discourses contribute differently to a sense of the aberrance of medieval disability. They construct disabled bodies as either a historical impossibility or ubiquitous in a way wholly unrecognisable to modern society—there "*would have been*" lots of "hunchbacks" then; implicitly, there are not now.

The latter construction—whereby a group is temporally siloed off from the normative present—is a common strategy in othering discourses. Johannes Fabian's idea of the "denial of coevalness," a "persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of [discourse] in a Time other than the present of the producer of [. . .] discourse," is instructive here.³⁶ The "denial of coevalness" allows hegemonic discourses to frame the Other as primitive, retrograde, a remnant of a thankfully superseded past: they are *then*,

³³ *The New Evidence*, 44:55-45:05.

³⁴ On tropes of "fat," gluttonous medieval kings, see Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Middle Ages in Popular Imagination: Memory, Film and Medievalism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 173-8.

³⁵ Pitts, *Digging for Richard*, loc. 2028; 2036.

³⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 31. The original quotation refers specifically to "anthropological" discourse.

we are *now*. The monstrous “hunchback,” whose physical difference is nominalised as the sum of their identity, belongs to a medieval *then*, the horror of which is juxtaposed with the superiority of the “upright” present.

The medieval *then*, as presented in popular culture, does indeed contain “plenty of hunchbacks,” among other aberrant bodies. Plaguey bodies, leprosy bodies, bleeding bodies, bodies left to rot in the street: all are residents of a medieval world often imagined as being uniquely “ravaged by violence, death, pain and disease.”³⁷ Paul B. Sturtevant’s survey of British young adults’ perceptions of the period revealed disease, violence and poor hygiene as among the most common associations, again evoking the idea of a “shaggy,” “barbaric” Middle Ages in which bodies are constantly imperilled.³⁸ As Pascal Massie and Lauryn Mayer note, this is reflected in medievalism-inflected popular culture: medievalist fantasy worlds such as *Game of Thrones* depict disability and illness as “if not the norm, at least [. . .] more frequent than in contemporary settings.”³⁹ Far from being unimaginable, then, as it was for the Ricardians, a king with a perceived physical difference fits well into these medievalist corporeal fantasies—as popular representations of Richard III following the discovery show.

A year after reading Carol Ann Duffy’s poem at Richard’s reinterment, Benedict Cumberbatch played Richard in a filmed adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, part of the BBC’s *The Hollow Crown* series. As Richard, Cumberbatch wore a back prosthetic—which he described, in language evoking the perceived horror of physical difference, as looking “distressingly real”—in order to mimic a “hunchback.”⁴⁰ The film opens with Cumberbatch giving the famous “Now is the winter of our discontent” speech shirtless, hunched over a chessboard. The camera pans across the prosthetic with a lingering voyeurism, meant to highlight the supposed alienness of Richard’s physique.⁴¹ Though, unlike the 2016 Almeida production, this *Richard III* did not explicitly allude to the excavation, its temporal proximity to the events and Cumberbatch’s genealogical connection to Richard strengthened the perceived links between the body on screen and the body discovered in Leicester in 2012. Cumberbatch-as-Richard’s prosthetic bears

³⁷ Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 8.

³⁸ Sturtevant, *The Middle Ages in Popular Imagination*, 32-6.

³⁹ Pascal J. Massie and Lauryn S. Mayer, “Bringing Elsewhere Home: *A Song of Ice and Fire*’s Ethics of Disability,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXII: Ethics and Medievalism*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 45-60, 50; see also Jane Stemp, “Devices and Desires: Science Fiction, Fantasy and Disability in Literature for Young People,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2004), 3.

⁴⁰ “Benedict on Playing Richard III,” BBC Two, May 5, 2016, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/529R68mM3xND38KwPBjHjw4/richard-iii>.

⁴¹ *The Hollow Crown: Richard III*, directed by Dominic Cook, aired May 21, 2016, on BBC Two, 00:46-03:59.

little resemblance to the appearance suggested by forensic analysis of Richard's skeleton; nevertheless, commentators described the prosthetic as "accurate," even "replicat[ing] exactly" the real curvature of Richard's spine.⁴² This prosthetic spine was positioned by Cumberbatch and the BBC as being not only authentic, but also key to understanding Richard's "medieval" psychology. In one interview, Cumberbatch suggested that Richard's actions were partly explicable by the supposedly period-typical ableism surrounding him: "[i]n medieval England if you were not born perfect, you were often drowned at birth."⁴³ Cumberbatch's language both equates disability with imperfection (*born perfect*) and reflects the popular notion that medieval societies inevitably connected disability with sin and punishment. This idea is resisted by scholars who argue that medieval constructions of, and accommodations for, disability were as various as those existing today.⁴⁴ As with the Ricardians, such historical nuances were easily disregarded. Instead, the BBC's *Richard III* used the discovery of the historical Richard's body to entrench its own medievalist fantasy, locating Richard in a "shaggy" Middle Ages in which bodily difference and disability were both common and contemptible.

The strongest expression of the connection between Richard's exhumed body and fantasies of his historical moment came from a 2015 *Guardian* article by the historian David Priestland. In it, Priestland criticises the mass interest and media "hullabaloo" surrounding the reinterment of "a king dead for over 500 years, particularly one with such a villainous reputation."⁴⁵ He characterises the reinterment as retrograde, nationalist pomp, branding it "a reboot of the medieval craze for relics"—the suggestion being that the popular fascination with Richard's bones risks catapulting Britain back into Richard's

⁴² Chris Hastings, "Benedict's Really Got the Hump: Cumberbatch Dons Prosthetic Hunchback to Play Richard III in BBC series," *The Daily Mail*, May 15, 2016, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3590907/Benedict-s-really-got-hump-Cumberbatch-dons-prosthetic-hunchback-play-Richard-III-BBC-series.html>; Benedict Cumberbatch, Sophie Okonedo and Adrian Dunbar (interview), "Benedict Cumberbatch on *The Hollow Crown*, Bloody Warfare and Discovering He's Richard III's Cousin," *Radio Times*, May 14, 2016, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/drama/benedict-cumberbatch-on-the-hollow-crown-bloody-warfare-and-discovering-hes-richard-iiis-cousin/>.

⁴³ "Benedict on Playing Richard III," BBC Two.

⁴⁴ See Joshua R. Eyer, introduction to *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 1-10, 3; Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, 13.

⁴⁵ David Priestland, "Leicester Deserves Better than the Bones of Richard III," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2015, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/23/richard-iii-leicester-bones-reburial>.

dim, grim, pre-rational age.⁴⁶ He ends with this warning: “Far from the country ‘walking tall’ . . . , there is a danger we are limping, hunchbacked, into the global future.”⁴⁷

In Priestland’s ableist metaphor, disability is tied to temporal retardation. To be disabled—to “limp, hunchbacked”—is to diverge from the straight path of progress, and to slip into following the crooked, even “villainous” ways of the long-gone medieval past. Richard’s curved spine becomes a symbol of all that modernity has superseded—of all that, according to Priestland, ought to be left untouched, buried deep in the soil of history.

Conclusion

Despite the constant circulation of images of Richard’s excavated skeleton in the media, it becomes difficult to truly *perceive* Richard’s spine amidst the exaggerations and distortions of the popular discourse that persistently worked to other it. His spinal curvature was by turns argued out of existence, framed as mutually exclusive with the martial hero image favoured by the Ricardians, or magnified to monstrous proportions, to demonstrate the sheer irreconcilable otherness of the Middle Ages. Rarely was it received as a fact that might enrich and complicate our knowledge of the historical Richard or of experiences of conditions like scoliosis through time. Depending on how the speaker liked their medievalism—and how they liked their Richard III—the spine was instead manipulated and misrepresented, rendered *invisible* or *hypervisible* in modernity’s constructions of the past.

Such responses to perceived disability are not unique to the case of the bones of a long-dead king. As W. J. Mitchell writes, the “invisibility/hypervisibility” dialectical duality, by which disabled people are subjected simultaneously to luridly fascinated gazes and to dismissal, incomprehension, and denials of their needs and humanity, remains “crucial to the experience of disability” today.⁴⁸ In 2016, a year after Richard’s reburial in Leicester, a UN inquiry found that years of British government austerity policies had resulted in “systematic violations” of disabled people’s rights.⁴⁹ The report highlighted both violent “invisibilization” in the ways in which disabled people were “merely processed” rather than “listened to or understood” by a callous benefits system, and the consequences of hypervisibility in the shape of “increasing hostility [and] aggressive behaviour” from a

⁴⁶ Priestland, “Leicester Deserves Better.”

⁴⁷ Priestland, “Leicester Deserves Better.”

⁴⁸ W. J. Thomas Mitchell, “Seeing Disability,” *Public Culture* 13, no. 3 (2001): 391-7, 393.

⁴⁹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Inquiry Concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Carried Out by the Committee Under Article 6 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention,” October 6, 2016, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRPD/CRPD.C.15.R.2.Rev.1-ENG.doc>, 3.

British public influenced by slanderous media rhetoric around disability.⁵⁰ The discourses surrounding the excavation may have been responding to a specific event, but far from taking place in a vacuum, they fall into familiar ableist patterns. As much as they reveal about contemporary medievalisms, they also expose an ableist desire alive and well in modern Britain to project corporeal fantasies onto disabled bodies—and, crucially, to have those bodies not answer back.

To return to the story with which this article began, the 2012 excavation revealed no clear voice of history emerging from the earth, crying out “here, here, here!” to its devoted seekers. Instead, it produced only mute bones, subjecting them to the distortions and clamorous voices of the present that claimed them. What would it mean, though, to read Richard’s skeleton with real, considered attention to what it uniquely communicates: that different and disabled bodies are not the special province of modernity or the Middle Ages, but exist and persist at all levels of society, throughout human history? What would it mean to do as Edmund’s searchers did, and use the body as an opening onto collaborative and empathetic, rather than othering and distorting, dialogue with the dead? The “voice” of the skeleton reveals nothing more and nothing less than that Richard III was a monarch who moved through the world with physical difference, and potentially with negotiations of disabling pain. That simple, significant truth should not be clouded by assumptions about the era in which he lived. We have found Richard’s body: let us now look him in the eye.

⁵⁰ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Inquiry Concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland,” 15-16.