

Richard III and Deformity on Film 1911 – 2016

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Abstract

As one of Shakespeare's best-known villains, Richard III has been the subject of almost thirty films, including foreign films and modern adaptations. This article will examine the ways in which Richard's deformities, the withered arm, hunched back, and lameness, were portrayed in a selection of films from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It will be shown that these physical deformities became increasingly visible and apparent in later films, and I contend that this is due to two opposing paradigms. The first is the reluctance of early filmmakers to have a central character with a visible disability. The second reason is the changing nature of societal understanding of what disability is and what it means for the person themselves. In the later twentieth century, the United Nations began to promote a different way of thinking about disability, promoting the idea that persons with disabilities should not be seen as incapable just because of their impairments. I argue here that the later depictions of Richard on film, Ron Cook's BBC production of the 1980s, Ian McKellen's 1990s version, and lastly, *The Hollow Crown* series with Benedict Cumberbatch as Richard III, increasingly demonstrate a much more physically impaired central character who is also very able. This will be shown in light of changing ideas in wider society about abilities and disabilities.

Keywords: Richard III, disability, film, deformity, Shakespeare, social models, medical models, skeletal remains

Introduction

In each film of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Richard's disabilities are clearly depicted: the hunched back, the withered arm, and the shortened leg. Richard walks with a limp, he is unable to use his right hand and his humped back is visible, although frequently placed under a greatcoat. However, in the earlier films - the 1911 and 1912 silent films, the Olivier version and even the BBC version - Richard's disabilities are not made explicit though the medium of film, despite being referred to by the character himself. The versions of the film I have chosen to analyse are as follows: 1) the 1911 *Richard III* starring Frank Benson as Richard III, filmed at the Stratford Memorial Theatre Company ('the 1911 silent film'); 2) the 1912 *Richard III* starring Frank Keane, filmed in the United States ('the 1912 silent film'); 3) the 1955 version with Sir Laurence Olivier ('the Olivier RIII film'); 4) the 1986 BBC Ron Cook full version, with all the original female roles included ('the BBC RIII film'); 5) the 1996 adaptation starring and directed by Sir Ian

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McKellen ('the McKellen RIII'); and 6) the *Hollow Crown* series with Benedict Cumberbatch as Richard III.

Three different scenes will be compared where possible:¹ the opening scene, Act I, scene i, introduces Richard to the audience, "Now is the Winter of Our Discontent"; Act I, scene ii, known as the "Wooing Scene" where Richard proposes to the Lady Anne; and lastly, the defeat of Richard III at the hands of Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth in Act V, scene iv. These are selected to show Richard as he demonstrates both the deformities and the capabilities of the character. In using the word 'deformities' instead of disabilities, I follow Shakespeare himself:

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking glass;
I, that am rudely stamped and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time 20
Into this breathing world scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them—
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to see my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity.²

Richard, Duke of Gloucester is deformed, and unfinished (1.1.20) and also frustrated by peacetime activities claiming not to be fit for the delights of peacetime, as he was born prematurely and is a deformed hunchback. Richard describes himself as 'rudely stamped' (1.1.16), 'curtailed of this fair proportion' (l. 18), 'cheated of feature' (l. 19) and 'deformed, unfinished' (l. 20), finally declaring that he will 'descant on mine own deformity' (l. 27).

Yet despite Richard's insistence that he is 'deformed', he does not tell us exactly what his body looks like. He emphasises that his body is unconventional and that he is not able to jump from bed to bed as so many in London do right now ('not shaped for sportive tricks' [l. 14]) and difficulty with movement ('I halt' [l. 23]). Thus, it becomes necessary for the actors and directors to interpret this for their own film productions, and it will be shown here that in just over a century of Richard on film, his deformities undergo dramatic changes: from a slightly drunken and lurch a barely visibly raised shoulder in the 1912 silent film, to a withered and completely useless arm and noticeably painful shoulder in the 1996 McKellen film, and the monstrous interpretation of the Cumberbatch's RIII in *The Hollow Crown* series, Richard becomes more visibly and more clearly deformed as we move through the decades from 1911 – 2016.

¹ The 1911 silent film does not show Act I, scene 1 "Now is the Winter of our Discontent." It does incorporate two scenes from Henry VI, Part II and then moves straight to the arrest of Clarence and then to the Wooing Scene. The 1912 film does the same.

² William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Act I, scene i.

Richard III (1911)

This silent film shows a series of thirteen scenes filmed in 1911 at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford.³ It features Frank Benson as Richard and Constance Benson (his wife in real life) as the Lady Anne, and does not show any of Richard's deformities at all.⁴ There is a slight suggestion of a lurch when he walks into the room where Henry VI waits innocently to be murdered.⁵ In the Wooing Scene, again Richard is not shown as deformed, although there is again a suggestion of a lurch, but he pulls a ring from his doublet to give to the Lady Anne with one of his two clearly working hands. There is no lameness or deformity visible. In the Battle of Bosworth scene, Richard and Henry Tudor, Duke of Richmond (Eric Maxon)⁶ fight a duel. Richard holds a sword in his right hand, and holds his left hand behind his back. At one stage he swaps the sword to his left hand, fighting equally as well with his right hand behind his back (or perhaps equally as badly, as Henry Tudor, curiously holding his own sword in his left hand throughout, vanquishes Richard and is crowned King). In blog discussion, Alex Good agrees, stating: "Frank Benson directs and stars as Richard (with little evidence of deformity)."⁷

Richard III (1912)

The 1912 silent film stars Frederick Warde as Richard III, Violet Stuart as the Lady Anne, and James Kane as Richmond. There are some slight visible deformities on display, but they are muted, restrained even. Richard stomps around, a little stooped compared to those around him, and there is the hint of a left shoulder raised higher than the right.⁸ However, after he returns to complete the murder of Henry VI (again this scene from *Henry VI, Part 3* is included), he wipes the sword that he holds in his right hand with his left hand, clearly showing a full range of physical abilities. When he wields his sword, it takes no effort at all. When he goes to replace his sword, his left hand scrambles to assist with placing the sword in its scabbard. He is clearly not unable.

When he gives the Lady Anne the ultimatum regarding marriage with him, his left hand is pressed to his heart. He takes her hand and kisses it, removing a ring from his right hand and placing it on her left hand. He is stooped, showing rounded shoulders and hinting at a misshapen back, but nothing is visible or apparent to the viewer. At the end of Part I, Warde's Richard marches off screen, his victory over the Lady Anne assured.

Throughout the film, Richard appears shorter than most of the other players by at least half a head. The only visible deformity is that of the rounded back, and the slightly elevated left shoulder. His arms and hands are not physically affected by his deformities. At the Battle of Bosworth, Richard again appears shorter than all his soldiers and uses both hands without

³ Michael Brooke, "Richard III (1911)", *Screen Online* (2014). At: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/440553/index.html>.

⁴ *Richard III* (1911), *YouTube*. At: <https://youtu.be/L9NWF9CGv9w?si=K4uBw23dB8cxZKD->

⁵ This film shows two scenes from *Henry VI Part 3*: the death of Edward of Lancaster and the death of Henry VI, both at the hands of Richard of Gloucester, the future Richard III.

⁶ Richard III (1919), *Screen Online* (2014). At: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/440553/credits.html>.

⁷ Alex Good, "Richard III (1911)", *Alex On Film* (2021). At: <https://alexonfilm.com/2021/11/23/richard-iii-1911/>.

⁸ In the original play, there is no indication of which, if any, shoulder is deformed or hunched.

deterrent, removing his crown with both hands and during the dream sequence, waving both arms around in the air. Both Richard and Richmond fight with their swords in their right hands.

Richard III (1955)

The 1955 version with Laurence Olivier as Richard III, Claire Bloom as the Lady Anne, and Stanley Baker as Richmond. The opening scene sees Olivier limp across from his brother Edward's empty throne toward the camera. Olivier's Richard has his right shoulder sit higher than his left (in direct contract to Wilde's Richard III). He has a pronounced limp and his gait is not normal: it is a cross between a 'spastic gait' and a 'waddling gait'.⁹ When he walks, he favours his left leg. He is clearly not *made for sportive tricks* (I. 14). His left arm rests on his sword in its scabbard and he demonstrates the uselessness of this arm and hand by lifting it slightly when he proclaims it *a withered shrub*. Here Olivier has interspersed a scene from *Henry VI, Part 3*:

Why, love forswore me in my mother's womb;
And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,
She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe
To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;
To make an envious mountain on my back
Where sits deformity to mock my body;
To shape my legs of an unequal size;
To disproportion me in every part,
Like to chaos, or an unlicked bear-whelp
That carries no impression like the dam.

This explains Olivier's Richard III: the combination of lines 14 – 23 from *Richard III*, Act I, scene I, and lines 153 – 162 of *Henry VI, Part 3*, Act III, scene ii. Thus, the audience is able to understand the deformities that Olivier's Richard talks about, giving more information than any passage in *Richard III* does.

In "Now is the Winter of Our Discontent," Olivier's Richard keeps his right hand gloved and his left hand ungloved. His *withered arm* rests upon a pillar when he states that he has *no delight to pass away the time* (1.i.25-27). There is a small hump visible on his right raised shoulder, but it is not explicit, merely referred to. He appears able, competent, despite decrying his unfavourable physical appearance, this does not seem to detract at all from his physical abilities. The Wooing Scene is presented in two parts, the first during the funeral procession of Henry VI where no resolution is formed, and the second part where Richard returns to woo the Lady Anne over the tomb of Henry VI. He pulls a ring from the little finger of his gloved left hand, and hands it to her, also putting both hands around her, almost in an embrace. Claire Bloom describes this scene as the Lady Anne being extremely vulnerable after the death of her husband, and being overpowered psychologically by Olivier's Richard, and

⁹ Jenna Fletcher, "What is Abnormal Gait?", *Medical News Today* (2017). At <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/320481#types>

that he was “extremely seductive at a time in her life when she needed a man to cling to.”¹⁰ Bloom describes her Lady Anne as “fallible... vulnerable... [there was] a weakness in her psychological makeup, [she was] not a fighter, [she] fell for a good line.”¹¹

During the Battle of Bosworth, as Catesby calls for assistance for Richard, now unhorsed, Richard is seen standing at the top of a hill, waving both arms around. He holds his sword in his right hand, now clad only in a short brown leather glove. He stumbles down the hill, less able than most but still able and capable of taking on ‘another’ Richmond.¹² When surrounded by Lancastrians, he reaches for his short blade at his back while still wielding his sword, demonstrating again his full physical ability. He is overcome by Richmond’s men, rises up briefly and then the “last of the Plantagenets” falls to the ground, dead. Up to and including the 1955 version of *Richard III*, we see no overtly visible deformities. The shortened leg, the withered arm and the misshapen back and shoulder are referenced by Olivier but apparently cause no great inability.

***Richard III* (1983)**

The 1983 BBC version of *Richard III* cast Ron Cook as Richard III, Zoe Wanamaker as Lady Anne, and Brian Deacon as Richmond. This production includes the entire text of the play, barring approximately eighty lines, and runs to nearly four hours. The opening scene presents Richard limping across camera, his left leg in a brace. There is a hint of a raised shoulder but no real visible deformity (apart from the leg brace). In the Wooing Scene, Richard presents himself to the Lady Anne so she might run the sword through him. He does this by holding both his hands out wide in supplication. Again, he has the use of both hands when he removes a ring from the little finger of his right hand, with his left hand, and presents it to Lady Anne. This shows that Ron Cook’s Richard is not visibly unable or disabled. And lastly in the Battle of Bosworth, Richard holds his shield competently in his left hand, and fights valiantly with his sword in his right hand, to his death at the hands of Richmond (who has a strong Welsh accent). Just one year later, the way Richard was portrayed would change forever.

***Richard III* (1984)**

In 1984 Sir Antony Sher played Richard III in a Royal Shakespeare Company production. His performance was considered a breakthrough and was described as audacious as it was the first major performance of the character as significantly disabled. Sher had used arm crutches to walk after snapping his Achilles tendon in an accident on stage years before playing Richard. He had to wear a cast for six months, and used arm crutches to walk, apparently finding the whole experience “frustrating.”¹³ He used this unpleasant memory of being temporarily

¹⁰ Alex Ramon, “Claire Bloom at 90: A new interview with the veteran of British stage and screen”, *British Film Institute* (2021). At: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/interviews/claire-bloom>.

¹¹ Ramon, “Claire Bloom at 90: A new interview with the veteran of British stage and screen”.

¹² “I think there be six Richmonds in the field; five have I slain today instead of him.” Act v, scene iv.

¹³ Jeffrey R. Wilson, “Crippling Richard III”, *Disability Arts Online* (2022). At: <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/cripping-richard-iii/>

crippled to help him prepare for the role of Richard in 1984, deciding to use crutches for the performance, emphasising Shakespeare's description of a "bottled spider."¹⁴

The performance was described in his obituary as "beyond astounding. He gatecrashed this play's performance history and threw down an audacious gauntlet to the hallowed shares of ... Laurence Olivier..."¹⁵ Sher played Richard with massive hump in the centre of his back, massive arms, and two crutches that fitted onto Sher's forearms, allowing him to scuttle across the stage, giving the impression of a poisonous spider.¹⁶ Sher's Richard III was visibly disabled. This performance was one of the first major portrayals of Richard III to seriously engage with the character's disability and would have lasting impact on the way Richard would be portrayed from that date onwards.

Richard III (1996)

In contrast, the 1995 version starring Sir Ian McKellen as Richard and Kristin Scott Thomas as the Lady Anne with Dominic West as Richmond, sees Richard as much more visibly deformed, yet able despite these deformities. McKellen's Richard does not have the use of his left arm at all, it is truly *withered* and constantly tucked into his jacket. He walks with a pronounced limp, much more so than any previous filmic version. His humped back is apparent, his left shoulder clearly distended and is visible when in shirtsleeves, and also under his military greatcoat.

McKellen's Richard is a charismatic military leader who lives with his visible deformities, determined that they will not prevent him from doing as he wishes. The story is reimaged in 1930s Europe, with black-shirted attendants and military paraphernalia. The opening scene shows Richard in military costume, with his left hand tucked into the pocket of his camouflage jacket, deftly shooting Edward Plantagenet, the Prince of Wales, between the eyes. There is no inability on display here. When discussing King Edward's predilection to "caper nimbly in a lady's chamber," McKellen's Richard is in a large public bathroom standing at a urinal, deftly zipping or buttoning his trousers and adjusting himself and repositioning his *withered arm* before moving across the room to wash his hand, again single handedly, all with one arm tucked into his jacket, and talking all the while. Richard's "marvellous dexterity with his good right hand and arm" is further demonstrated in the opening scene: in an effort to console Clarence on his way to the Tower, Richard produces a small Bible from his coat.¹⁷

The Wooing Scene offers further insights into the *ability* of Richard, despite the visible deformities:

In the space of the thirty-five lines...that elapse between Lady Anne's spitting and Richard's offer for her to kill him, McKellen managed to undress his upper body with one hand. Off came the greatcoat, then, from over his military tunic, the leather strap supporting the belt from which his sword hung: unbuttoning his tunic, he then dropped

¹⁴ Wilson, "Crippling Richard III."

¹⁵ Michael Coveney, "Sir Antony Sher Obituary", *The Guardian*, 3 December (2021). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/dec/03/sir-antony-sher-obituary>.

¹⁶ Paul Hricik, "Book review: Antony Sher, *Year of the King*", *The Shakespearean Student*, 30 August (2022). At: <https://shakespeareanstudent.com/tag/antony-sher/>.

¹⁷ Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 106.

to his knees offering Anne his bright sword and his mocking heart... McKellen topped the audacity of this moment by using his teeth to remove the ring from his finger, offering it to Anne as a token of his contrition and affection.¹⁸

In the Wooing Scene, Richard also deftly produces a handkerchief to wipe his face after Anne spits at him. McKellen's Richard is adept at manipulating his deformed body.

While not strictly a part of the analysis, the scene where the young Duke of York asks that he be born on Richard's shoulders is worth including here. This time, the young Duke does actually attempt to climb onto his shoulders. Instantly, Richard is struck down with pain from having his hump so roughly treated; he falls to the ground, refusing any assistance and actually growling at Lord Stanley to keep away, and not attempt to touch him. This is the first time on film that we catch a glimpse of the pain that the character would have lived with. No other film version of Richard references pain or discomfort, or a lack of physical ability, despite the character stating that he is rudely "stamped... deformed... unfinished... lamely....". Does McKellen's Richard, as Samuel Crowl states, "poke ironic humour at his own physical deformity" or does he simply ignore his own lack of physical ability and work around it, adapting his actions to his abilities? In all the above activities, McKellen's Richard makes no mention of his lack of physical ability, nor any reference to it when he adapts his actions. His humorous attitude is in his interpersonal actions, as he invites the audience to be impressed with the way he manoeuvres and exploits those around him. Crowl goes on to say that "Richard's agility at manipulating his rigid... body became a metaphor for his skill in manipulating the body politic and bending gender relations to his own ends."¹⁹ But for one, he seeks acknowledgement, for the other, he simply ignores the body that is deformed and expects others to do so as well.

In the Battle of Bosworth scene, McKellen's Richard does not miraculously regain the use of his arm, as is seen in some of the previous films. He manages well with his hand tucked into his jacket again, clearly limping but moving rapidly to avoid Richmond's troops. With one hand he seizes control of a machine gun and trains it on an approaching 'plane. When he tries to escape Richmond, or perhaps to draw him off from his followers to fight a duel, Richard moves quickly, despite his deformities, only to fall to his death, aided by Richmond's pistol. This to date has been the film version to portray Richard's deformities clearly and matter-of-factly. This strong interpretation does not seek to scare or alarm the audience, but it could be argued that for the first time, Richard is visibly disabled on the screen, and also very able, very capable.

Richard III (2016)

In the *Hollow Crown* film, Richard is portrayed as a veritable monster, not just relying on the text to depict the monstrous. This time we see the actual monstrous: the naked and deformed back and spine. Physically he is more grotesque than either, and the opening shot of his naked, deformed back sets the tone. Producer Sam Mendes remarks that "I don't think you've seen

¹⁸ Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, p. 107.

¹⁹ Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, p. 108.

Richard with his shirt off.” The prosthetics apparently took over three hours to put on and they add to the sense of realism.²⁰ This Richard is also the most able of all the above depictions. In the opening scene, Richard is shown moving pieces around a chess board, an apt metaphor for what is to follow. His right arm is able, his left withered, and his back shows a cruel deformity on a level not seen before in any film of Shakespeare’s Richard III. His spine is twisted, it looks ugly and painful. When he turns to the screen to talk to the audience in the “Now is the Winter of Our Discontent” speech, we see the hump over his shoulder. It is clear that this deformity cannot be hidden under a robe or a coat. He is indeed *curtailed of this fair proportion, deformed and unfinished*. It is easy to imagine dogs barking at this Richard.

He has a decided limp, favouring his left leg. However, he also manages in this scene, while talking to the audience, to put on a shirt one-handed, and does this very capably. In the Wooing Scene, Richard limps toward the Lady Anne as she kneels at the grave of Henry VI. He pulls a ring from his robe with his right hand and places it on her right hand. He is clearly very deformed and also very able, capable of managing his needs and desires. At the Battle of Bosworth, Richard parades on his horse, his armour designed around his deformities, his left shoulder higher than the right even under the armour. He fights Richmond one-armed in the mud, calling for his horse, although his previously useless arm is now holding a dagger. He is very able in the battlefield, hampered more by the mud than his deformities, it seems. Despite his obvious physical deformities, Richard shows significant capability and adaptability, dressing himself one-handed, wooing the beautiful widow, and fighting effectively in battle with his armour adapted to his body. No longer must Shakespeare’s Richard III hide his deformities behind a greatcoat or a robe, but instead he will show how he can adapt his body to his environment.

The Changing Nature of the Portrayal of Deformity on Film.

The different ways Shakespeare’s *Richard III* has been portrayed on film can be related back to contemporaneous socio-cultural understandings of deformity and disability. These understandings change and are changed in response to the willingness of audiences to watch a central character portray a visible affliction. Additionally, the way ‘deformed’ people were viewed as being capable – that is able to live a full life, contribute to society in meaningful ways - changes as well. I argue that this is due to two competing paradigms, in addition to Antony Sher’s radical interpretation of Richard in the 1980s on the stage. The first is the reluctance of early film makers to have a central character with a visible disability. The second is the changing nature of societal understanding of what disability is, and what this means for the person themselves. Disability is defined by the World Health Organisation as “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”²¹

²⁰ Alex Good, “*The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses* (2016)”, *Alex on Film* (2022). At: <https://alexonfilm.com/2022/01/18/the-hollow-crown-the-wars-of-the-roses-2016/>.

²¹ Article 1 of the *Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006). At: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-1-purpose.html>.

The United Nations declared that 1981 would be the International Year of Disabled Persons, calling for a plan of action at the national, regional and international levels, with an emphasis on equalization of opportunities, rehabilitation and prevention of disabilities. The theme of IYDP was “full participation and equality,” defined as the right of persons with disabilities to take part fully in the life and development of their societies, enjoy living conditions equal to those of other citizens, and have an equal share in improved conditions resulting from socio-economic development. Other objectives of the Year included: increasing public awareness; understanding and acceptance of persons with disabilities; and encouraging persons with disabilities to form organizations through which they can express their views and promote action to improve their situation.

This led to the Decade of Disabled Persons, 1982 – 1993, where “one of the major outcomes of the Decade of Disabled Persons was the adoption, by the General Assembly, of the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities in 1993.”²² This had a significant impact on society’s approach to disability rights and inclusion, with changes in perspectives leading to changes in policy-making, for example, disability as a welfare issue to a human rights concern, and a global disability strategy aimed at promoting full participation of people with disabilities in society.²³ The Decade of Disabled Persons 1983-1992 was a pivotal period that reshaped global perspectives on disability, empowered disabled individuals, and laid the groundwork for future advancements in disability rights and inclusion. Additionally, in the 1970s and 1980s, the way in which disability was understood moved from a medical to a social model. The World Report on Disability finds that “responses to disability have changed since the 1970s, prompted largely by the self-organization of people with disabilities, and by the growing tendency to see disability as a human rights issue (7).”²⁴ The report also finds that ‘medically focused solutions have given way to more interactive approaches recognising that people are disabled by environmental factors as well as their bodies’.²⁵ This is the move toward a social model of disability, as opposed to a medical model.²⁶ This means a transition from the idea of disabilities and impairments viewed as an illness requiring medical perspectives, treatments, and cures.²⁷ The medical model was all-pervasive until the later part of the twentieth century – that a person with disabilities is ill, different, inferior, of less value, living a life less worth living and requiring medical intervention - and this is reflected in popular media as well, evidenced by the portrayal of Shakespeare’s Richard III on film.

²² Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, forty-eighth session, resolution 48/96, annex, of 20 December (1993). At: <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dissre00.htm>.

²³ “A Brief Human Rights Timeline”, *Australian Human Rights Commission* (2024). At: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/brief-human-rights-timeline>.

²⁴ *World Report on Disabilities*, p. 3.

²⁵ *World Report on Disabilities*, p. 3.

²⁶ Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan and St Martin’s Press, 1990).

²⁷ Dominique Allen, Neil Rees, and Simon Rice, *Australian Anti-Discrimination and Equal Opportunity Law* (Canberra: Federation Press, 2018), chapter 7.2.2.

Disability on Film

When the ramifications of the UN's promotion of People with Disabilities is seen through a socio-cultural lens, it is noted that characters with a disability did not play a central role in a film until the late 1980s. Early representations of disability in film and television were often problematic, focusing on shock value, comedy at the expense of disabled individuals, or portraying them as objects of pity. However, over time, there has been a gradual shift towards more nuanced and authentic portrayals. In silent films and early animations, disabilities were often used for shock or comedic purposes. A quantitative study of disability portrayal in film was undertaken by Byrd et al using the *Monthly Film Review* from 1977-1979. Of 287 feature length films, 33 or 11.5 per cent contained disability depictions.²⁸ A further study of 1051 films from 1976–1983 found a similar 11.4% disability roles where “the largest group was psychiatric disabilities (43.5%) ... followed by sensory (13%)”. While the first depiction of a person with a physical disability on film was in 1898, it would take over twenty years before we see even a slight rise in the number of people with disabilities on screen.²⁹

In the early twentieth century, disability and deformity were viewed as something sad or unfortunate. Filmgoers would be invited to feel sorry for the person with a disability. One ‘suffered’ from a deformity. People born with deformities were kept out of sight or used as a subplot. They did not appear as central characters in films. During the period after World War I, we start to see more people with disabilities on film, as supporting cast, not as main characters. The key themes of these films were redemption and “curability.”³⁰ This is the idea that those who were maimed during the war should be heroic about their suffering, while striving to cure themselves, that is, to become whole again. This is an example of the medical model of disability on film.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame was filmed in 1923 and 1939, and the Hunchback, Quasimodo, is not the central character. Even the poster for the 1923 film shows Esmerelda as the central character, and Quasimodo crouches down in behind her so that his deformities are barely visible. Quasimodo is portrayed as a kind-hearted and isolated young man with a pronounced hunchback, who has lived his entire life within the confines of Notre Dame cathedral. Despite his physical deformity, he possesses incredible strength and agility from years of ringing the cathedral's heavy bells. Quasimodo's journey in the film revolves around his desire to experience the outside world and be accepted by society. His life changes dramatically when he attends the Festival of Fools and meets the compassionate gypsy girl Esmeralda, who shows him kindness and friendship. Throughout the story, Quasimodo grapples with his feelings for Esmeralda, and his growing courage to stand up for what is right, ultimately becoming a hero in the eyes of the people of Paris

Quasimodo cannot walk as others do; he gambols along as one leg is shorter than the other. His shoulders are clearly deformed. Yet the character wears an overcoat so that his flesh does not show, and his deformities are not overtly visible to the audience. Compare this to

²⁸ E.K. Byrd and R. B. Pipes, “Feature Films and Disability,” *Journal of Rehabilitation*, vol. 47 (1981), pp. 51-53, cited in S. Safran, “The First Century of Disability Portrayal in Film: An Analysis of the Literature”, *The Journal of Special Education* vol. 31, issue 4 (1998), p. 473.

²⁹ Safran, “The First Century of Disability Portrayal on Film,” p. 468.

³⁰ Safran, “The First Century of Disability Portrayal in Film,” p. 467.

scene in the McKellen film where Richard is dressing, and his hunched back is clearly visible under the brown dress shirt he wears, or the Cumberbatch Richard III where we see the deformities in the (prosthetic) flesh; the distorted and distended spinal column, with its grotesque curvature and colouring. It is confronting to the audience in ways not permitted in the 1920s and 1930s and even in the 1950s with Sir Laurence Olivier playing Richard III. In the 1930s, we see less people with disabilities on film, and this is response to the great global depression and filmmakers wanting “more entertaining and less controversial plots.”³¹ The 1940s and into the 1950s saw a more sympathetic portrayal of people living with disabilities, and this is in response to more and more returned servicemen and women, injured - maimed - during the war who declined to be kept in darkened rooms. On film, these people move from being someone in need of a cure, to someone who could undergo rehabilitation – that is someone who is LIVING with a disability, or a deformity.

On film, people with disabilities move from being someone in need of a cure, to someone who is *living* with a disability. In the 1960s, we see more films featuring people “who appeared in the mainstream, facing obstacles to live independently.” *A Patch of Blue* (1965), an American film made from Australian Ruth Kata’s novel *Be Ready with Bells and Drums* (1961), starring Sidney Poitier as Gordon Ralfe and Elizabeth Hartman as Selina D’Arcy, tells of a compassionate Black man’s relationship with a blind White girl. Selina’s blindness is core to her, but it does not define her completely, and the film focuses on her journey toward education and self-determination, learning Braille and developing the skills for independent living.

Both *My Left Foot* (1989) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) marked a significant shift in disability representation in mainstream cinema, moving away from purely inspirational narratives to complex character studies. *My Left Foot* tells the story of Christy Brown, an Irish writer and artist with cerebral palsy who could control only his left foot. Significantly, Daniel Day-Lewis portrays Brown as a fully realized character, complete with flaws and frustrations, rather than merely an object of inspiration or pity.³² The film addresses themes often denied to disabled characters in earlier cinematic representations, such as sexuality and artistic ambition. *Born on the Fourth of July*, directed by Oliver Stone and starring Tom Cruise as Ron Kovic, presents disability through the lens of Vietnam War veteran experience. The film tracks Kovic’s transformation from an idealistic young soldier to an antiwar activist after being paralysed in combat. His disability is central to the story.³³

The emergence of these films in 1989 reflects broader social changes in disability rights awareness. These films contributed to public discourse about disability rights and accessibility. Both films were significant in presenting disability as one aspect of complex characters rather than their sole defining characteristic. They helped establish disability as a subject worthy of serious dramatic treatment. In the same way, it is not until the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century that we see the lead character in *Richard III* display deformities in ways unimaginable or unacceptable thirty, fifty or one hundred years earlier. This is due to the promotion of the rights of people with disabilities by the United Nations in the 1980s, the move

³¹ Safran, “The First Century of Disability on Film”, p. 469.

³² Christy Brown, *My Left Foot* (London: Vintage, 1997 [1954]).

³³ Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: Akashic Books, 2005 [1976])

to the social model of disability, and the increasing understanding and respect of the filmgoing public toward people living with disabilities.

Conclusion

The 2012 discovery of Richard III's remains beneath a car park in Leicester presented an unprecedented opportunity for osteoarchaeological analysis of a historically documented English monarch. The skeletal remains, excavated by a team from the University of Leicester Archaeological Services, provided substantial insights into both the king's physical characteristics and the circumstances of his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485.³⁴ The osteological examination revealed that Richard III suffered from adolescent-onset scoliosis, though seemingly not as severe as contemporary accounts might suggest. The curvature of his spine would have made his right shoulder appear higher than his left, but would not have resulted in the pronounced physical deformity described in Shakespeare's portrayal. The scoliosis was idiopathic in nature, developing during his teenage years, and would have caused minimal functional impairment to his mobility or fighting capability.

Richard III was historically depicted as a villain, largely due to Shakespeare's plays. These emphasise his physical deformities, such as the hunchback, to underscore his supposed medieval character. In medieval Christian thought, physical deformities were often seen as signs of divine punishment for sin or as marks of God's grace.³⁵ Richard III's scoliosis could have been interpreted in his time as a sign of divine displeasure, reinforcing his negative image. The medieval period has a nuanced approach to disability, where individuals with physical deformities could occupy unique social roles, despite the individual's sinful nature or a manifestation of divine displeasure.³⁶ The discovery of his Richard III's remains not only confirmed historical accounts of his physical appearance, but also provided a deeper understanding of how medieval attitudes toward disability and morality shape his legacy.

The historical Richard of Gloucester was not hideously deformed, there was no *curtailment of fair proportion* and there would not have been any great difficulty of movement. What the sole contemporary chronicler had recorded is correct, simply that his right shoulder was raised slightly higher than his left shoulder. Jo Appleby, the osteoarchaeologist in charge of the physical analysis of his body, states that "the physical disfigurement from Richard's scoliosis was probably slight since he had a well-balanced curve...his right shoulder would have been a little higher than the left...no evidence that Richard would have walked with an overt limp...."³⁷

And yet when Benedict Cumberbatch played Richard III in the *Hollow Crown*, he chose or was chosen to do so in the most extreme depiction to date on screen. Special effects have come a

³⁴ Dan Jones, "They Found Richard III. So Now What? What the remains of the 'hunchback' king can teach us about other English royals", *Smithsonian Magazine* (2015). At: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/they-found-richard-third-so-now-what-180954322/>.

³⁵ Carole M. Cusack, "Graciosi: Medieval Christian attitudes to disability", *Disability & Rehabilitation* vol. 19, no. 10 (1997), p. 415.

³⁶ Cusack, "Graciosi", p. 419.

³⁷ Jo Appleby, Piers D. Mitchell, Claire Robinson, Alison Brough, Guy Rutt, Russell A. Harris, David Thompson, and Bruno Morgan, "The scoliosis of Richard III, last Plantagenet King of England: diagnosis and clinical significance", *The Lancet*, vol. 383, no. 9932 (2014), p. 1944.

long way since 1911 and Cumberbatch's Richard III was horrific in its depiction. This raises an interesting point, as to whether future productions of *Richard III* should necessarily seek to outdo each other in their depictions of the deformities of Shakespeare's Richard III. Knowing what we know now about the real Richard III, should we temper the presentation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* to show the lived reality of the man. Or should we continue to interpret the deformities according to each generation's understanding of what it means to live with a differently shaped body, that some call deformed and that today is called disability?