

Gender Disassociation and Identity Displacement as an Effect of Victorian Depictions of Disability: *John Halifax, Gentleman* and ‘The Withered Arm’

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In *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), Phineas Fletcher, feeling uncharacteristically strong and healthy, tells us that ‘for that one night, at least, I felt myself a man’.¹ By telling us that only when he is unusually strong can Phineas feel truly masculine, the author, Dinah Mulock Craik, implies that, in his lifelong, inescapable infirmity, he is not ordinarily masculine enough to be considered a man. In ‘The Withered Arm’ (1888), Thomas Hardy plays with concepts of beauty in relation to disfigurement, presenting a disabled woman who feels unable to identify with her femininity. In these two texts, Craik and Hardy toy with concepts of gender, and associating with common tropes of one’s gender, highlighting that gender expression and feelings of gender identity relate heavily to one’s physicality. As a man enfeebled by his illness, Craik’s Phineas Fletcher is consistently feminised and aligned with female characters. Conversely, Hardy’s Gertrude Lodge, once considered delicately feminine, feels exhaustingly unable to perform her feminine duties as a wife due to her untreatable physical disfigurement, as she is

¹ Dinah Mulock Craik, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (London: Readers Library Publishing Co. Ltd., 1856), p. 60. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

pulled further and further from any form of gender identity. Through the acute feminisation of Phineas, and Gertrude's disassociation with her once 'evanescent' femininity, it is clear that Victorian writers assign disability a sense of gender in a disparaging way, creating a sense of disassociation of gender and identity displacement for disabled characters.² Throughout my exploration of the two texts, I will be analysing their presentation of gender disassociation. For the purposes of the essay, this term means how characters fail to identify to their gender in typical ways, and how they express concepts of androgynous or cross-gender identity.

In Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman*, disability is depicted as unmanly. Whether this is through depicting Phineas as child-like or feminised, he is rarely presented as an adult man, especially in comparison to the perfect masculinity of John Halifax. Phineas' disability comes in the form of extreme physical weakness and constant fatigue, leaving him unable to walk, either without support or at all at varying points of the novel. Partially, the feminisation of Phineas comes from the fact that he is housebound. Phineas is unable to work and is therefore bound to the domestic sphere of the home. This aligns Phineas more with Ursula than John Halifax, ultimately feminising him. Given that this novel endorses separate spheres for men and women, as seen through the constant naming of Ursula as simply 'the mother' following her marriage to John, it is especially pertinent that Phineas is housebound. Craik makes a distinct decision to show women in the home, and men in the workplace, so in keeping Phineas in the feminine sphere, she feminises the disabled character. Interestingly, Rosemarie Garland Thomson tells us that femininity and disability are often equated in literature, as they 'are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life'.³ We can see how Craik's characterisation of Phineas is aligned with a tradition of writing

² Thomas Hardy, 'The Withered Arm', in *The Wessex Tales* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912), pp. 1–20 (p. 3). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Politicising Bodily Differences', in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 1–224 (p. 19).

women as ‘a diminished man’, especially in relation to a dichotomy between domestic and economic life: women are never economic beings, and neither is Phineas (Garland Thomson, p. 20). In writing Phineas Fletcher, a disabled man, in feminised terms, Craik characterises him as less-than-manly in multiple implicit ways. I suggest that Phineas’ feminine domestication begins when he meets John Halifax, who is paid to ‘take [Abel’s] son home’ (Craik, p. 13). As soon as the protagonist is introduced, his purpose is keeping Phineas in the home. This masculine/feminine dynamic is furthered, as John confirms that he is ‘used to work’ and would accept ‘anything that [he] can get to do’ (Craik, p. 13), in terms of labour. When John Halifax is introduced, he is presented as an able-bodied, masculine figure who is comfortable with any manual, honest work, and his purpose is immediately shown to be keeping the disabled, feminised figure of Phineas in his rightful place: the home.

Opening up this idea of Phineas as a domestic female character, later in the novel, together Phineas and Ursula seem to make up the single figure of John’s wife, which presents Phineas as acutely feminine. In these later chapters, Phineas’ behaviours are distinctly aligned with those of the mother, as he is a domestic figure. This can be seen when Ursula asks, ‘Will you – John thinks it had better be you – will you give a message from us to – Maud’s governess?’ (Craik, p. 209). In this moment, Craik makes it clear that Phineas has been rendered domestic in their household, and that he can be trusted with interpersonal and pedagogical tasks. This characterises him in alignment with the mother, and highlights that, in his disability, Phineas’ household role is reduced to that of domesticity and is thus feminised.

RH Hutton notes that ‘it is hard to suppress the fear that Phineas Fletcher will fall hopelessly in love with John Halifax, so hard is it to remember that Phineas is of the male sex’, which encapsulates how Phineas is aligned with Ursula; in his infirmity, Phineas sees John in a romanticised, heroic light, which makes his character appear intensely feminine, and he even

appears as a mother and wife.⁴ Early in the novel, John states that ‘Phineas is a little less beneath your [Ursula’s] notice than I am’ (Craik, p, 99). Although he refers to social status, this has the effect of further aligning Phineas with Ursula, and the two seem to morph into one companion figure for John. Phineas is constantly feminised, by himself and by others, by being aligned with Ursula. This sense of femininity through association is extended by Phineas himself, who often aligns himself with the feminine figures of a family. For example, at one point, Phineas describes how he could understand how ‘any father might have been proud of such a son, any sister of such a brother, any young girl of such a lover’ (Craik, p. 69). Despite initially referring to a father figure, Phineas reverts to imagining the emotions of a sister and a young girl, highlighting how, especially in his feelings toward the strong, caring John Halifax, the *modus operandi* of Phineas’ mind is feminine. Phineas’ disability means that he sees John as a strong, masculine figure, positions him towards the mother/wife role. We can see how Phineas seemingly feminises himself in his feelings towards John, so we can determine that the fact that his disability has weakened him pushes him to rely on strong, masculine figures in a feminine way.

Phineas’ experiences of motherhood condition him towards feminised behaviours. Interestingly, Phineas notes that his mother died before he could remember her, which suggests that for the majority of his life, his family had consisted of his father and himself. It is possible that Phineas occupies an acutely feminised role because of the lack of a female force in his domestic sphere; without a feminine influence, and being already housebound due to his disability, I suggest that Phineas began to take on a domestic, feminised role, in order to fill the absent role of the mother and wife. Indeed, his role in the Halifax household later in the novel reasserts this, as we can see that he is aligned both with Ursula and the governess, as

⁴ RH Hutton, ‘Novels by the Authoress of *John Halifax*’, *North British Review*, 29 (1858), p. 258, cited in Melina Moore, ‘John Halifax, Gentleman’, *Nineteenth-Century Disability: Cultures and Contexts*, <<https://www.nineteenthcenturydisability.org/items/show/20>> [accessed 7 December 2020].

mother figures. Phineas' lack of a mother figure forces him into a feminine role in order to fill a vacuum of femininity in the household, and his childhood experiences offer more to suggest a feminised character. He tells us that 'Jael, the only womankind we ever had about us, and who... certainly gave no indication of her sex in its softness and tenderness' (Craik, p. 16). Therefore, compared to his female acquaintances' harsh, cold personalities, Phineas' mannerisms and behaviours often feel more typically nurturing and soft, which serves to make him seem effeminate even in comparison to female characters. Also concerning his childhood experience, Phineas is often described in childish terms, which furthers the sense of unmanliness. Craik presents Phineas in childish terms in his first meeting with John Halifax, describing how Phineas felt that 'though I was his senior, I seemed with him, out of my great weakness and infirmity, to feel almost like a child' (Craik, p. 18). This quotation shows us very explicitly that Phineas' disability positions him as a child, especially in relation to the able-bodied John Halifax. Furthermore, Phineas describes not how he was perceived, but how he himself feels, so I would note that this perception of disability in terms childlike vulnerability is indicative of a social outlook so strong that it has pervaded his sense of self.

Similarly, Phineas is feminised in his inability to act as an heir to his father's business. Here, the dynamic between John Halifax and Phineas Fletcher seems akin to an arranged marriage between Victorian households, as their friendship secures Abel Fletcher an heir. Phineas' disability leaves him unable to undertake, and therefore, understand Abel Fletcher's tannery business, which leaves an heir-shaped hole. In casting John Halifax as his apprentice and heir, Abel Fletcher feminises his own son due to his disability. This becomes clear when Abel tells John that 'thee [John] hast in some measure taken that lad's place' (Craik, p. 67), highlighting that John is the son that Phineas could never fully be. This is furthered by Phineas' open and distinct distaste for tannery, as contrasted with John's eagerness to work, which is shown when he describes 'how I [he] disliked the tan-yard and all belonging to it' (Craik, p.

20), whereas John does not ‘care what it is, if only it’s honest work’ (Craik, p. 21). Phineas describes openly that he cannot stand his father’s business, and his infirmity prevents him from taking an active part in it, and so Phineas is feminised as a quasi-daughter who cannot stand to inherit. Conversely, John Halifax is immediately willing, if not eager, to work at Abel Fletcher’s tannery, and his able body, combined with his eagerness, will increasingly position him as a viable apprentice and heir. By positioning Phineas as both unwilling and unable, Craik positions him less as a son, and more as a daughter, and so through his disability, he is feminised. In *John Halifax, Gentleman*, Dinah Mulock Craik consciously casts the disabled Phineas Fletcher in roles of the housewife, mother, and governess, as well as the doting lover. In characterising Phineas in constantly feminised terms, we understand that disability was perceived by her Victorian audience in concepts of fragility, inability, and domesticity.

In ‘The Withered Arm’, there is a slightly different dynamic between femininity and disability. Here, we see a woman who is disfigured by another woman. Thomas Hardy considers what we mean by ability and disability, as well as considering the implications of disability and disfigurement for women at this time. Firstly, the focus on the heavily physical description in ‘The Withered Arm’ establishes a setting for complex discussion on disfigurement. Before she is even seen, Gertrude is described as ‘a rosy-cheeked, titsy-totsy little body’ (Hardy, p. 69). In focusing on the unseen woman’s physicality, it is made clear to us from the offset that Gertrude Lodge is valuable for her appearance alone, which establishes a setting in which her later disfigurement will prove to be extremely traumatic. Indeed, Rhoda focuses on Gertrude’s appearance as a means of judging her value. For a lifelong labourer, Rhoda values people by virtue of their body’s physical ability. She asks her son to judge ‘if [her hands] look as though she had ever done housework, or are milker’s hands like mine’ (Hardy, p. 71). For Rhoda, individual worth comes from one’s ability to do manual labour, as this is how income is generated, which reflects the 19th century context of the industrial

revolution, as we can see Hardy commenting on the necessity of physical ability to survive, rather than positioning it as a convenience or luxury for Rhoda. In believing that personal worth relies on physical ability, Rhoda condemns Gertrude as less able even before her arm is disfigured by Rhoda's dream, as we see that the delicate, feminine body is seen as ornamental, but ultimately not valuable.

Indeed, Gertrude's dainty physical description as a beauty is emphasised in contrast to the harsh, corporeal description of Rhoda amongst the other milkmaids. First introduced as 'the thin worn milkmaid' (Hardy, p. 70), we are always made to see Rhoda as a working body. Furthermore, when her son is seen 'pacing along abreast of the horse' (Hardy, p. 73), alongside Mr and Mrs Lodge in their cart, he is aligned with a working animal, and he is further reduced to simply an able body. We can again note that Rhoda is described in corporeal, industrial terms through the word play between 'pale' and 'pail' (Hardy, p. 78). These homophones appear in the same sentence, with the former describing Rhoda, so we can understand how Hardy uses language to equate the able female body with concepts of labour. In comparison to the delicate, feminine beauty of Gertrude, Rhoda is characterised simply as an able body, haggard from working hard, but it is this arduous labour which creates her sense of self. Rhoda is physically described in terms of labour, which reflects her belief that a person only has worth if their body is capable of hard labour.

The interplay between femininity and disability really occurs when Gertrude's disfigurement has been developing for some time, and she feels that she is repulsive in her husband's eyes. Confiding in her husband's one-time-lover, Gertrude tells Rhoda that her withered arm 'makes my husband – dislike me – no, love me less. Men think so much of personal appearance' (Hardy, p. 83). In a similar way to how Rhoda values people by their physical ability to work, Gertrude feels herself valued by her appearance; her job as Mr Lodge's wife is to be pretty, and in being disfigured, she is failing him. Again, Gertrude's physical

experience speaks to contemporary notions of disability, as her womanhood means that she was judged on either her ability to work or her appearance, and here, Hardy highlights how she is unable to consistently fulfil either of these categories. In this sense, her body is as disabled as it can possibly be. There is an interesting dynamic between Rhoda and Gertrude concerning Gertrude's diminishing beauty. Rhoda's 'feeling for the young wife amounted well-nigh to affection' (Hardy, p. 82) following her disfigurement, despite her intense jealousy previously. Indeed, Rhoda confesses to the reader that she 'did not altogether object to a slight diminution of her successor's beauty' (Hardy, p. 83). Evidently, Rhoda, in her jealous feelings of usurpation by Mr Lodge's wife Gertrude, revels in a rival's sudden disability. This speaks to the relationship between femininity and disability, as Gertrude's painful disfigurement is perceived by Rhoda to be a reward to her: she considers disability to be a hindrance, rather than a uniqueness, and takes joy in her own ability, both as a worker and a beauty, suddenly supplanting that of her successor.

Later in the narrative, descriptions of Gertrude's arm continue the sense of repulsion surrounding female disability. Interestingly, Hardy describes her arm as a 'withering limb' (Hardy, p. 92). The use of the present participle here highlights that her condition is not fixed, but ever worsening. Furthermore, it is later described as a 'half-dead arm' (Hardy, p 99). These two descriptions – one of constant pain and one of lifelessness – highlight to me that female disability was viewed as a kind of death. In losing 'her personal beauty' (Hardy, p. 91), Gertrude's life comes to a standstill. She obsesses over treatment of her disfigurement, be it medical or mystical, which is characterised as extremely difficult, 'especially for a woman' (Hardy, p. 93), and fails to maintain a happy marriage; Hardy tells us that, once disabled, Gertrude is characterised by a distinct lack of life, and her femininity is seen as something that can only prevent her from accessing treatment. This is expounded by Gertrude's death. Hardy describes how 'her delicate vitality, sapped perhaps by the paralysed arm, collapsed under the

double shock that followed the severe strain, physical and mental' (Hardy, p. 107). In this critical moment, Hardy expresses to us that her life force was drained, firstly, by her disability, and, secondly, by her treatment of it. This suggests that disability is characterised by lifelessness whether it is reversible or not. In 'The Withered Arm', through the duality of Rhoda and Gertrude, Hardy considers disability from an acutely female perspective of labour and beauty, especially concerning how this equates to worth and self-worth. Hardy does this primarily by describing it in terms of ugliness and disgust, highlighting the impact disfigurement has on the role of women; be they labourers or wives.

Finally, in both *John Halifax, Gentleman* and 'The Withered Arm', there is an important relationship between disability and parenthood. It is consciously noted in 'The Withered Arm' that Gertrude 'had brought [Lodge] no child' (Hardy, p. 91), which is especially pertinent in relation to the fact that we know Rhoda to have mothered Mr Lodge's son, and, similarly, in *John Halifax, Gentleman*, Phineas never marries, let alone fathers children. In both stories, the disabled character is pictured as infertile, or unworthy of parenthood. There is a consistent social outlook on disability between both of these texts, which come from different moments of the Victorian era, as they both feature disabled infertility. In crafting disabled characters as childless, both Craik and Hardy present a view that disability is not just a half-life, but that disabled characters are not worthy of creating life. For Hardy and Craik, especially in an age of scientific discovery, but vitally before understanding of DNA and heredity, disability is understood in bleak, basic terms. Garland Thomson notes that Victorian society's 'dominant understanding is that disability confers pain, disease, functional limitation, disadvantage, and social stigma; limits opportunities; and reduces quality of life', which neatly encapsulates a Victorian understanding of disability.⁵ Without the understanding of DNA's

⁵ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Building a World with Disability in It', in *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem and Moritz Ingwersen (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), pp. 51–62 (p. 53).

impact on heredity, treatment and respite were in short supply, and industrial revolution Britain counted value in physical ability, so I would suggest that the reproduction of disabled people is shown as something to be actively avoided.⁶ In showing disabled characters to be actively infertile, or as lifelong bachelors, Hardy and Craik subscribe to a Victorian view of disability in basic terms, and ultimately express the view that a disabled body is one that should not, under any circumstances, be reproduced.

These two texts make it clear that, for Victorian writers, disability is inherently gendered, a trend that they themselves perpetuate. Hardy and Craik present an interplay of gender and disability to highlight how disability feminises men, and how disfigurement defeminises women; regardless of one's starting point of gender, disability and disfigurement create a state of disassociation and ill-fitting identity. There is a focus on vulnerability and domesticity in *John Halifax, Gentleman*, which emphasises the feminised aspects of Phineas' personality, whereas the physicalised descriptions of Rhoda in 'The Withered Arm' force us to view Gertrude's disfigurement as destructive of her delicate femininity. Through these two narratives of physicality, it is clear that disability and gender interact in Victorian fiction to create a sense of identity displacement, as characters do not associate, and are not associated, with their gender in a typical way.

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