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# Smouldering Village Beliefs: Gender, Disability, and The Persistence of Metaphor in Critical Interpretation and Adaptation of “The Withered Arm” (Thomas Hardy, 1888)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The first section of this chapter examines a cross-section of literary criticism spanning more than a century and uncovers a distinctive pattern of disability metaphorisation in critical responses to “The Withered Arm”. The second part questions Hardy’s representation of gender and disability, with recourse to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s study of the interplay between ableism and misogyny. The chapter then opens up a dialogue between the text and adaptations made for radio and television. This approach foregrounds the reciprocity of gender and of disability in casting as deviant the female and the functionally non-normative body.

**Keywords:** Thomas Hardy, Gender, Disability, Adaptation, “The Withered Arm”

**Palabras clave:** Thomas Hardy, género, discapacidad, adaptación, “El brazo marchito”

*People don't care to give alms without some security for their money; a wooden leg or a withered arm is a sort of draught upon heaven for those who choose to have their money placed to account there.*

*Henry Mackenzie, The Man of Feeling (1818: 35)*

## Introduction

In 1796, a little more than two decades before the period in which Hardy sets “The Withered Arm”, Edward Jenner would carry out the first successful vaccination against smallpox, by inoculating James Phipps with pus from cowpox blisters on the hands of a milkmaid. As immunologist Francisco Leyva-Cobián

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notes, this innovative procedure came about in part because Jenner was a country doctor with an ear for the everyday talk of the people around him and a gift for observing natural phenomena (Marteles 2004).

Whereas Jenner looked upon a rustic scene of chattering milkmaids with cowpox sores on their hands, and saw a possibility of advancing scientifically upon the dangerous process of smallpox variolation, Hardy, or his narratorial avatar, conjures an equivalent scene in “The Withered Arm” as the locus for rumour and, possibly, the casting of spells and curses. Equally attentive as Jenner to the conversation and lore of the rural classes, in “The Withered Arm” Hardy tunes in to a moment where advances like those being made by Jenner coexisted alongside fears that “inserting cowpox pustules into the skin might cause one to sprout cow horns” (Frampton 2020).

In what follows, however, this chapter does not set out to read “The Withered Arm” as an apologia for superstition; on the contrary, it examines how this narrative can be read forward as one that articulates the interface of disability and gender studied in the cultural critique of scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. In this reading “The Withered Arm” narrativizes intersections where women and people with illness and disability are marginalised and oppressed and also demonstrates the insufficiency of either gender studies or disability studies alone to account for how and why the exclusion of those with non-normative bodies comes about.

In the first of the chapter’s two parts I look at a representative selection of literary criticism of “The Withered Arm” that spans just more than a century in order to uncover an archaeology of metaphorical interpretations and erasure of illness, and especially of disability. Although the concept of disability as we use it now did not exist when Hardy was writing, the story nevertheless makes a good candidate for an exercise that examines the continuities in critical responses to a literary text engaged with a non-normative body and a functionally diverse person.

In the second part of the chapter, the discussion moves to the question of how gender and disability are represented in Hardy’s story. This section encompasses adaptations of the story for television and for radio, and by aligning these with the original text the chapter opens up a new approach to the story that foregrounds the gendering of disablement and the disabling of gender.

## 1 An Archaeology of Disability Erasure

In the preface to the two-volume edition of *Wessex Tales*, Hardy is keen to establish that the tale which underpins “The Withered Arm” grew out of facts. There

was in the real world somebody who corresponds with Rhoda Brooke, and the author apologises for the trick his memory has played on him, leading him to shift to the night-time her diurnal experience of being oppressed by an incubus. However, the author concludes this short preface by remarking that “The stories *are but dreams*, and not records” (1920: viii, emphasis added). Dreams and facts, the clarity of daytime and empirical knowledge, and the shadows of nocturnal obfuscation are, then, set in apposition in the author’s own framing of the collection in which “The Withered Arm” appears.

This binary is also articulated in the gap of sixty years between the publication of the story in 1888 and the windows of time in which it is set –1819 (parts I-V), and 1825 (parts VI-IX). The retrospective setting is evoked directly through narratorial interventions that make diachronic comparisons, as when, for example, the reader is told that Gertrude’s horseback journey across the heath was made easier by the fact that “Enclosure Acts had not taken effect, and [she] rode along with no other obstacles than the prickly furze-bushes, the mats of heather, the white water-courses, and the natural steep and declivities of the ground” (98–99). The gap between when the story is set and when it was written is also introduced in deliberate anachronisms. For example, the narrator tells us that “From her boy’s description and the casual words of the other milkers, Rhoda Brook could raise a mental image of the unconscious Mrs. Lodge that was realistic as a photograph” (76), a comparison that could belong neither to the person who inspired the character of Rhoda Brook nor to her literary analogue.

While the realism of Rhoda’s inner vision is benchmarked against the facticity of a photographic record, the appearance of Gertrude’s wound takes as its metric a reference to the occult: “My husband says it is as if some witch, or the devil himself, had taken hold of me there, and blasted the flesh” (83). Similarly, the blocky proto-assembly-line aspect of the milking shed with its “large red rectangular animals” (69) makes for a stark contrast with the image of a contemplative Rhoda, her gaze fixed upon ashes and embers, more evocative as it is of the dark flame-lit intimacy and otherworldliness of El Greco’s *Fábula* (see Figs. 1a and 1b) than of intimations of nineteenth century industrial development.



**Fig. 1a (Left):** El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos), *La fábula*, 1580. El Prado, Madrid (Public Domain). **Fig. 1b (Right):** Screen capture from BBC television adaptation of “The Withered Arm”, with Billie Whitelaw as Rhoda Brook

This tension between the factual and the oneiric in “The Withered Arm” has generated much critical interpretation, and also exegetical anxiety. It is characterised by an unsatisfied need for the facts that would facilitate an etiological epistemology of Gertrude’s condition, and by an unrelenting drive to contain in a metaphorical box the unknowability of what ails or disables Gertrude, thus making sense of what the condition *means*, if not of what it *is*. One could call this drive the persistence of metaphorization, and it is a marked feature of criticism of “The Withered Arm”. Since the story has been the subject of critical interpretation almost continuously since it was published in 1888, an examination of a cross-section of the literature yields sight of an approach that has remained fundamentally and consistently one of metaphor-making. In this sense, the critical literature on “The Withered Arm” offers the archaeologist of illness and disability metaphors a rich, if reiterative, seam to mine.

One of the first critical responses to “The Withered Arm”, however, belongs more to the tendency towards etiological epistemology than it does to the metaphor-making paradigm. Writing to Thomas Hardy in 1888, Leslie Stephen expresses the discomfiture brought on by the story’s withholding of a clear explanation and name for the problem with Gertrude’s arm. In Stephen’s view, unless the reader can name what makes Gertrude different, the story is flawed. His call for an explanation is couched tentatively but betrays epistemological panic:

Either I would accept the superstition altogether [...] or I would leave some opening as to the withering of the arm, so that *a possibility of explanation might be suggested* [...] Something, *e.g.*, might have happened to impress the sufferer’s imagination, so that the marks would be like the stigmata of papists. As it is, *I don’t quite know where I am*. (Maitland 1906: 393–94, emphases added).

As others have already noted, this reaction to “The Withered Arm” perhaps betrays Stephen’s unease with the possibility that superstition might leak from the environs where it properly belongs and should remain. The reference to the “stigmata of papists” illustrates how alien the beliefs touched on in Hardy’s story were to the author’s critical friend. Imaginative and eloquent milkmaids, country conjurors, and their rustic brethren are, and, by implication, should be, as foreign as continental Catholics who believe in physical expressions of their credo. The sceptic must distance himself from those who entertain such notions. Containing the group is also to contain and keep at arm’s length the condition. There is a drive both for knowledge, then, and also for the boundaries that this knowledge would make known, and along which a *cordon sanitaire* could be erected thus maintaining class divisions, which extend to the imagination. While one can only speculate on the exact source of the anxiety that motivates Stephen’s criticism of the open-ended aetiology of Gertrude’s complaint, the need to know is expressed in a matter-of-fact way. What were the facts from which this tale grew?

By the 1920s this question seems to have been largely displaced and criticism asks the story to tell us instead what the withered arm *means*. In *Thomas Hardy’s Universe* (1924), Ernest Brennecke asserts that in “The Withered Arm”:

A woman’s hatred for her successful rival is so strong that when she, in her imagination, grasps the arm of her enemy, the undeniable mark of her fingers appears on the arm of the actual person, and causes paralysis of the limb. (1966: 19–20)

In this interpretation, Gertrude’s condition is first made interchangeable with paralysis, and paralysis in turn is made illustrative of, and effected by, the hatred Rhoda feels for the younger woman who has supplanted her as a co-progenitor of further Lodge children. Gertrude’s arm means something about Rhoda’s emotions and signifies less about Gertrude’s subjective experience of living with a condition that sets her apart from her husband and from her community.

Forty years on, Richard Carpenter posits a similar metaphorisation of Gertrude’s withered arm in his introduction to Hardy’s fiction. He says that Hardy “create[s] a haunting tale of the objectification of hate and jealousy *in physical terms*” (1964: 77, emphasis added). And some twenty years after Carpenter equated Gertrude’s condition with the somatisation of markedly negative affect, Romy Keys turns in her analysis of Hardy’s story to a Freudian paradigm. She notes that the collision of forms in the story has long troubled critics and reconciles character and environment in the text around notions of the *abseits* and *unheimlichkeit*, which gather precisely at the narrative and geographical spaces found along the edges of generic disassembly. She finds uncanniness

in the narrative's pathogenetic hedging, and in its ducking of direct answers to questions of how real the supernatural is for the characters described, and for readers. With respect to the incubus as the source of the withered arm, she says that "the narrator encourages our disbelief while offering no alternative explanation" (1985: 110). This means in turn that "the reader must assume the role of a detective" (1985: 107), becoming an investigator who resolves enigma with metaphorical solutions to the "crime" of unknowable illness pathogenesis or disability aetiology.

In Keys' transfer of enigma to metaphorical proxies, the raw emotions of hate and jealousy identified by Carpenter as the value of physical anomaly take on Freudian qualifications yet remain essentially the same. The story is, says Keys, "an essay on the pathology of sexual jealousy [...] a sexual fable" (1985: 106), and the withered arm itself "clearly symbolizes a sexual wound: Lodge's impotence" (1985: 115). Furthermore, "Gertrude declines from Lodge's sexual neglect" (1985: 115). In Keys' interpretation, the moment of anagnorisis – when Rhoda, Lodge, and Gertrude are brought together around the corpse of the dead son – is also a juncture where the metaphorical value of the paralysed arm is extended to every part of the young man's dead body: "The dead son literally embodies the obstructed sexuality and family represented by the withered arm" (1985: 116). The withered arm is a metaphor, then, not only for sexual jealousy but also for mortality, an equation which betrays the fear of disability, latent in the story, perhaps, which sees in a non-normative body a portent of death.

For Kristin Brady the withered arm practically disappears as a distinguishing physical feature. In her list of contrasts between Rhoda and Gertrude – "dark and fair [...] poor and wealthy, rejected and beloved, guiltily vengeful and innocently victimized" (1982: 25) – Brady does not include disabled and non-disabled, or healthy as opposed to suffering from a long-term illness. This aspect of the differences between the two women is erased when Brady says that "they are like different views of one image" (1982: 25). Arguably what we find here is a denial of disability in "The Withered Arm" inasmuch as this reading posits a binary interpretive schema for reading across the story's two female protagonists and yet omits entirely the distinction between disabled and able-bodied.

Writing a decade after Keys and Brady, Suzanne Johnson similarly minimises the significance of the withered arm *qua* disability or illness through a series of interpretive gestures that locate changes to Gertrude's body and to her health within a wider pattern of metamorphoses. Johnson aims to make sense of the ambiguities of "The Withered Arm" by fitting the story within definitions of the fantastic. She says that "[It] resists all realistic explanations for the strange events it chronicles while never actually endorsing the alternative, other-worldly

dimension implied by those events” (1993: 131). The fantastic does not dismiss the more improbable aspects of the story as mere superstition, or as the product of naïve credulousness, and neither does it entirely guarantee their plausibility within an empirical mindset.

In this fantastic realm, and in Johnson’s formulation of its parameters, the meaning of “The Withered Arm” is not primarily available to interpretation in allegorical, poetic, or psychological terms. Instead, it is to be understood as “a tale of metamorphosis”, and one in which, furthermore, “the title alludes to only one – and not the most important – of the transformations recounted” (1993: 135). Facets of individual psychology are less important in this reading than the way in which affect and emotion drive transformation: “Hardy manages to evoke the utterly destructive power of repressed anger, desire, and envy without positing a clear cause and effect relationship between Rhoda’s vision and Gertrude’s affliction” (1993: 133). Again, disability, illness and pain recede into the background in this interpretation, to be perceived not in their own right but in the affective shadows that they cast.

Despite the fact that Johnson’s analysis depends on allowing for the possibility of an explanation for the synchronicity between Gertrude and Rhoda that falls outside the ambit of superstition, disability and illness as metaphor work their way in to her critique, albeit inconspicuously. For example, she writes that “The fantastic metamorphosis of Gertrude’s arm *is paralleled* by the debilitating personality changes of all the protagonists” (1993: 137 emphasis added). In a sense it is the six-year hiatus opened up by Hardy between the first and second halves of the story that redacts the most significant part of this process of physical metamorphosis, something which makes it difficult to determine how fantastic, or not, it is. The narrator tells us in the descriptive montage that stands for the narrative’s missing six years that “The once blithe-hearted and enlightened Gertrude was changing into an irritable, superstitious woman” (1920: 91). In this recapitulation of a period lost not only from the story but also from Gertrude’s life, her moodiness, and her immersion in quack remedies, stand out. Contortion and disfigurement are also mentioned, yet there is little sense of what it has been like for this woman to live with a relentlessly worsening condition, one that has been progressively disabling her for years.

By following the lead of the narrative montage that follows the ellipsis, and drawing a parallel between the withering of the arm and personality changes in the story’s protagonists, Johnson effectively reinstates the metaphorical function of Gertrude’s disability or illness. Reactive responses in a person who experiences unexplained and unstoppable changes to the body become what the story is *primarily* about, that is, the enigma of the withering arm itself is of less interest in a

story framed by the fantastic than Gertrude's "metamorphosis from a generous, enlightened girl to a vengeful, superstitious woman" (1993: 135). What happens to Gertrude's body is diminished in importance. In this reading the shift between being able-bodied and being disabled needs to occupy a relatively insignificant position in order to underpin and articulate those other metamorphoses considered more noteworthy. What stands out in the story, Johnson argues, is Hardy's "scathing indictment of the sexual hypocrisy of his culture" (1993: 136). If he also intended the story to speak to the significance accorded to illness and disability in the Victorian system of morals, this is not a theme unpicked in Johnson's analysis.

In the 2000s, Gilmartin and Mengham take a similar approach inasmuch as they look at "The Withered Arm" as a story in which disfigurement affects the entire cast of characters, rather than any one in particular: "The many marks which mar the lives of this story's characters represent impressions upon the body of poverty and labour, and of injustices which cross class and gender lines" (2007: 11–12). Gilmartin and Mengham return to the connection made by Romy Keys between Gertrude's affliction or impairment and the registration of the inequities related to sexual competition. In this later reading, however, the question of sexuality and sentiment is not restricted to the notion of sexual jealousy experienced at an individual level and is instead extended to encompass a gendered psychology: "The 'blasting' of Gertrude's arm, although it seems so fantastic, is actually a means of gauging the sheer force of women's sexual anxieties" (Gilmartin and Mengham 2007: 13). The metaphorical equation made between the disabled or ailing body and a wider, more generalised problem, is quite clear here and Gertrude's arm is not only symbolic but indexical. Gilmartin and Mengham introduce a new element to the metaphorical decoding of the withered arm, however, when they identify it as one node of an infection that affects the entire *dramatis personae*: "All the characters in the story are marked, and the marks and impressions they receive are conveyed from one to another as a blight or disease" (2007: 14).

Conceiving the affliction as an infectious blight also allows the story to be read as one where Hardy enacts social justice by levelling down the differences between the squirearchy and the farm hands. The farmer's wife, if not the farmer himself, pays for her husband's exploitative indiscretions in the past: "The blight [...] passes something of the neglect and injustices [Rhoda Brook] has been dealt onto her rival's unsullied flesh" (Gilmartin and Mengham 2007: 14). For this analysis to work, the withered arm has to be read as the manifestation of a disease and it therefore settles the ambiguities in the story between illness and disability.



For Alan Smith, writing in 2019, it is not only Gertrude's class but her exogeny that sets her apart. The changes she undergoes, including, presumably, the transformations to her arm and to her use of it, make manifest that she sticks out like a sore thumb as a newcomer to Holmstoke: "The outsider coming into a rural community and thinking it idyllic at first and believing that rationalism will solve any of its mysteries is a well-used trope in folk horror. [Gertrude] is from an urbanized middle class background and [...] Egdon changed her" (Smith 2019: 181).

In a cross section of criticism of "The Withered Arm" spanning 120 years we see that a request for an explanation of the cause of Gertrude's condition – and also for an explanation of what it *is* – yields to a focus on what the ailing limb *means*. From early on, the metaphorization of illness and disability in the exegesis has been a constant. The momentum that prompts the transposition between bodies and psyches described in section three of the story, "The Vision", bleeds from the diegesis to the exegesis so that a narrative of a non-normative body part is transposed to narratives of what this abnormality means in the dynamics of the story. Jealousy, sexual frustration, infertility, and class and gender inequities are some of the meanings that have been made from metaphors of Gertrude's condition in the literature.

Withering implies a process of attrition, and with it a gradual and incremental loss of function. Descriptions of Gertrude's condition in the story register at several instances its progressive aspect, and the effect this has on her ability to carry out everyday tasks. For example, at first Gertrude carries "her arm stiffly" and later we are told that she has the arm in a sling. In part IV, when Rhoda encounters Gertrude on horseback, she notes that the other woman "held the reins with some difficulty" (1920: 84). At the end of part V, just before the narrative will break for the hiatus of six years, "the *gradual* loss" (1920: 90, emphasis added) of Gertrude's use of her left arm is remarked on with reference to whisperings heard in "the many-dairied lowland" about Gertrude being "overlooked" (1920: 89–90) by Rhoda Brook.

Gertrude calls her condition a disfigurement and recognises that while she may conceal it, others know that it is there. Indirectly she expresses awareness of disability as a matter of knowledge and of perception, and not only of what can and cannot be seen. The penetrating photographic gaze that is turned upon the striking newcomer is never applied to a disfigurement that defines her, without being defined itself. Something apparently caused by a vision remains occluded. While the story admits the gradual worsening of Gertrude's condition in occasional descriptive details of its debilitating nature, the narrative structure also forecloses this same admittance. Six years of living with a condition that remains

unnamed, untreated, and that progressively affects both Gertrude's physical abilities and her mental state are collapsed into an ellipsis. Only in a circumlocutory way does the story permit us to share this experience and to imagine what it would be like.

The narrative allows us to see that Gertrude suffers chronically from pain – “It pains me dreadfully sometimes”, she says of her arm (1920: 82). Thus, Hardy lets in some light on what it is to live with an ongoing and debilitating condition only to black out this window. It is, therefore, not surprising that critical responses to the story that metaphorize Gertrude's condition often approach it as an illness, and not as a disability, or not as an illness the chronic nature of which makes it disabling. Thus, we find, for example, as detailed above, Gilmartin and Mengham's interpretation of the withered arm as one physical mark among many that are indications of a community-level dysfunctionality caused by secrecy, inequality, and the mistreatment of women. Similarly, Johnson's drawing of parallels between the withered arm and the personality changes that occur across the *dramatis personae* posits the condition more as transmissible illness than as an enduring disability that colours an individual experience of the world.

Thus, Avi Ohry's recent differential diagnosis of Gertrude's complaint is in some ways a departure from a critical literature marked by the persistence of metaphor, and in other ways a continuation of it. In order of likelihood, Ohry speculates that someone presenting with Gertrude's symptoms might be suffering from Marinesco's hand, a disease with characteristic neurological lesions; monomelic brachial atrophy or Hirayama disease, a cervical myelopathy characterized by atrophy of the distal upper extremities; Parsonage-Turner syndrome, which presents with sudden onset of upper extremity pain followed by progressive neurologic deficits; brachial amyotrophic diplegia; or, lastly, a conversion-somatoform reaction, i.e., “hysterical” paralysis.

Ohry qualifies this range of possible diagnoses by remarking that “We will of course never be able to know the exact nature of Gertrude's hand paralysis. In those days, even a real doctor, not only a quack, would miss the exact diagnosis” (2015: 192). While offering this reasonably precise range of possible diagnoses of what ails Gertrude's arm, Ohry is also very sympathetic to Tony Fincham's perspective in *Hardy the Physician* (2008) and his reading of the author as a writer who was attentive to the limitations of scientific medicine. Diagnosis is not a cure: and diagnosis, by itself, is not a prescription for how to live with a progressive and disabling condition. As well as living with the pain and the increasing disability occasioned by the withering of her arm, Gertrude must also adjust to the fact that she remains a mystery to medicine: “the surgeon had not seemed to understand the afflicted limb at all” (Hardy 1920: 82). If Gertrude is bewitched,

this is not the only way in which she is overlooked; the medical science of the time, as Hardy's story effectively underscores, overlooked and could not define her condition.

It is not only the condition per se and its disabling consequences which cause her to suffer, but the diagnostic impasse that she experiences when her body is scrutinised, not by Rhoda's photographic imagination, but by the medical gaze. In this sense Hardy's story has a very contemporary value. When we look at the condition as one that cannot be named, the narrative connects with the experiences of people not only in Hardy's time, but in our own, who are denied a nomenclature for illness, disability, or non-normativity that they experience. One way of reading the superstitious beliefs that circulate in "The Withered Arm" is to see them as evocations of the detrimental marginalisation of, and prejudice against, a subjectivity diminished as a result of the epistemic vacuum created by diagnostic impasse. Ohry's differential diagnosis, then, addresses Leslie Stephen's objections to Hardy's story, but only partially. We may be closer to knowing what it is that ails Gertrude, but the aetiology of her condition is just as obscure as ever. The explanation could be that there is an impossibility of explanation. "The Withered Arm" confronts us with the possibility, as uncomfortable today as it was in 1888, or in 1819, of an unnamable and inexplicable condition. The story encourages us to ask why we cannot live with this, and to query the origins and purpose of forces that demand clarification of enigmatic disability.

## 2 Gender and Disability in Adaptation

As we can see from an archaeological investigation of interpretations of "The Withered Arm", in the exegesis it is difficult to extricate Gertrude's condition from a bundle of metaphors that effectively foreground other issues while pushing into the hinterland the disability itself. Just as in the diegesis the arm recedes from the penetrating photographic gaze that can otherwise conjure precisely described human features, each time the disfigured limb is re-presented in the exegesis as a cypher for something else, we lose sight of it and we also lose sight of the character as a woman with a disability.

The erasure of disability is conjoined with the erasure in the story of Gertrude as a woman, and this is not unexpected when we have in mind Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's contention that disabled bodies and women's bodies have historically been subject to similar patterns of vanishment. "Both the female and the disabled body", Thomson writes, "are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority" (1997: 19).

“The Withered Arm” dramatizes the nexus of deviant femininity and deviant disability in the axis Gertrude follows from a newcomer looking for her place in a rural community to a marginalised figure who lurches between being a homebody preoccupied with “bunches of mystic herbs, charms, and books of necromancy” (Hardy 1920: 91) and a “harum-skarum young woman” (Hardy 1920: 99) riding alone across the heath to attend hang fairs. The six-year hiatus between parts V and VI of the story speaks only in a prolonged silence of the experiences of a disabled woman living with an undiagnosable condition and with unremitting pain. The fade to black that this device effects upon Gertrude’s narrative as a disabled woman illustrates that these are experiences to be rendered unknown and unseen.

Even with this erasure, and from the outset, the story, and its gendered aspect was unpalatable to some gatekeepers. Michael Millgate notes that *Longman’s Magazine* rejected Hardy’s submission, in 1887, on the grounds that “The Withered Arm” was “too grim and unrelieved for a magazine read mostly by girls” (2004: 266). Was it the unhappy ending that the editors had in mind, or did they intend by grimness not only the tragedy of lives needlessly cut short and the host of broken and unhappy characters but also the story’s suggestion that femininity lived in the form of domestic confinement and submissiveness is a crippling condition?

While *Longman’s Magazine* fretted over the risk of alienating female readers, Hardy was becoming impatient with a dominant form of English fiction that he figured both in terms of gender *and* of an implied artifice of bodily normativity. In a letter to Henry Massingham, written in 1891, Hardy voiced his long-standing concern with ridding English literature of its figurine-like characterisations in order to create a “more virile type of novel” (Purdy and Millgate 1978: 250). Hardy would tell his correspondent that “The doll of English fiction must be demolished’ (Purdy and Millgate 1978: 250). In “The Withered Arm”, a story about deformed love, and diverse bodies, perhaps Hardy was working out a turning point in this process of throwing off physiologically unreal and sexless characters and their porcelain brittleness in favour of flesh and blood beings with desire and a heartbeat.

When Rhoda demands from her son a detailed portrait of her antagonist, he says of Gertrude: “Her face [is] as comely as a live doll’s” (Hardy 1920: 74). Is Hardy’s object in afflicting Gertrude with years of suffering to make her real and less doll-like? Does her transformation from live doll to suffering flesh and blood woman, and thence to corpse, execute in summary and narrative form the project on which Hardy was embarked for literary characterisation more generally? It is noteworthy, at least, that only a few years before railing against dollish

fiction Hardy should have written a doll-like character into what has become one of his most well-read stories, and that the process of unmaking the doll should be played out through the representation of a female character whose disability becomes more pronounced as her femininity – understood in the social context described by the story – is diminished.

By the end of the story, if Gertrude is no longer a doll, neither has she become liberated, sexually or otherwise. Her references to changes in the way she is perceived as her ailment and disfigurement become more pronounced allow us to see that she shifts from being objectified by a gazer interested in her doll-like features to being objectified by the stares drawn to her non-normative body. As the ailment develops, Gertrude tells Rhoda: “I shouldn’t so much mind it [...] if – if I hadn’t a notion that it makes my husband dislike me – no, love me less. Men think so much of personal appearance” (Hardy 1920: 83). Her evaluation of her circumstances is demonstrative not only of her awareness of the importance of how she looks, and of how she is looked at, but also signals the transformation in the way she is being viewed. Even before her arm begins to ail her, she is conscious of being stared at by Rhoda’s son, and by the members of the parish. Staring at Gertrude while she has yet to acquire the ailment that will lead to an impairment and to disability, the boy’s concentrated focus on the newcomer adumbrates the events that will follow in the narrative. As Garland-Thomson puts it “The stare is the gesture that creates disability as an oppressive social relationship” (1997: 26), and the generative power of the visual exchange between Gertrude and Rhoda’s son can be read in this light as well as in terms of the Gothic and of superstition.

The belief among the people of Holmstoke that Gertrude has been overlooked by Rhoda Brook plays out in a very literal way the disabling effect of staring as a gesture. Similarly, one could read the incident of the incubus not as an enigma about Hardy’s intentions with regard to the supernatural but as a summoning into the discourse of late nineteenth century fiction of the nexus that existed then as now between notions of the female body and the disabled body as monstrous and horrifying. The incubus, dream, and Gertrude’s simultaneous development of pain symptoms are, then, not so much about supernatural synchronicities as they are about using generic conventions to suture the female and the disabled. By blending ideas about witchcraft, monstrosity, female intuition and synchronicity, and disfigurement, the scene in “The Withered Arm” where Rhoda and Gertrude connect remotely lends itself to a reading informed by Garland-Thomson’s insight that “Not only has the female body been labelled deviant, but historically the practices of femininity have configured female bodies similarly to disability” (1997: 27). It is Rhoda, *qua*

woman, who “makes” Gertrude disabled, as it is the younger woman’s coming into womanhood through marriage to Lodge that sees her become impaired. Gertrude occupies the space where similarities in the disparagement of women and of disability come together. The question of what it is that ails her creates an enigma, on the one hand, and, on the other, it articulates the story’s registration of female gender and disability as discrete, yet related, sources of social inferiority.

If making Gertrude disabled and disfiguring her achieves Hardy’s goal of demolishing a fictional doll detached from real human physiology, that outcome comes at a price, in the sense that while the process may make the character more believable as a flesh and blood person it also has the effect of erasing her from view. Like the readers of *Longman’s Magazine*, it seems we have to be shielded from something about Gertrude’s life, and from the adaptations she must make to different forms of staring. “The Withered Arm” pivots around the similar configuration of disabled and female bodies and yet also projects into an inscrutable void the transformation of Gertrude’s body from one that is studied for its exemplarily normative features to one that attracts stares on account of its anatomical deviance. Six years of Gertrude’s life are lost from view and, when she comes back into focus, she has become a superstitious woman “whose whole time was given to experimenting upon her ailment with every quack remedy she came across” (Hardy 1920: 91).

When we re-join Mr. and Mrs. Lodge, Gertrude has become “contorted and disfigured in the left limb; moreover, she had brought [her husband] no child” (Hardy 1920: 91). The doll’s brokenness, then, is also figured in her putative barrenness, putative, perhaps, since the narrator describes the Lodges’ relationship as one marked by “prosiness, and worse” (1920: 91). It is no wonder, then, that the metaphorical interpretation of Gertrude’s disability as a somatisation of infertility should have been such a persistent feature of critical readings of “The Withered Arm.” Ohry’s diagnosis of Gertrude’s complaint tells us nothing about her ability, or not, to bear children, and neither, in point of fact, does the narrator’s, though he hints that the couple’s childlessness might be an inevitable adjunct of how their relationship has developed. Garland-Thomson notes that “Whereas motherhood is often seen as compulsory for women, disabled women are often denied or discouraged from the reproductive role” (1997: 26), an insight that offers us another view of the story’s infecundity theme. Instead of Gertrude’s arm and its affliction representing infertility, could it be that it is her seeming inability to bear a child that itself has meaning? In other words, is her childlessness a reflection back on the community of unspoken hostility to the idea of a disabled woman being a mother?

The impetus in the body of critical literature is in essence to swap out disability for childlessness: Gertrude's impairment is the visible stigma she bears for failing to provide her husband with an heir. The template for this metaphorical step is established in the diegesis, as noted previously. However, when we look at the story through a lens that brings together the view both of feminism and of disability studies, we may draw an opposite conclusion, i.e., that Gertrude is not invalidated because she is childless, but is childless because she is disabled and because of ableist prejudice against disabled motherhood. In the scene where Trendle's conjuring involves the breaking of an egg in a cup the two women protagonists come to know each other, and themselves, while concentrating their attention on an ovum. We do not have to be superstitious, or even to wonder how much Hardy wanted his readers to believe in the supernatural, to appreciate that this is a lesson in the community identification between adequate womanhood and reproduction. The social construction that proscribes disabled motherhood could be the spell that is being revealed when Gertrude sees a recognisable likeness in the liquified egg that Trendle invites her to gaze upon.



**Fig. 2.** Gertrude, chastised for her childlessness, grasps her arm and occupies a corner of the frame. Screen capture

Both the television adaptation and the most recent radio adaptation of “The Withered Arm” situate questions about Gertrude’s fertility centrally in their narrative reworkings of the short story. In Irene Shubik’s 1973 production of Rhys



Adrian's adaptation of the text for British television, Gertrude's marginalization – she is, quite literally, pushed into a corner of the frame (see Fig. 2) – follows directly from a confrontation with her husband concerning their childlessness. In the televised version a narrative ellipsis of unspecified length is conveyed by a series of dissolve shots that move between medium close ups of Gertrude's ailing arm and the abandoned former home of Rhoda and her son. Whereas in the story the passage of time measures the worsening of Gertrude's condition, the montage effect in this adaptation makes the arm into a clock: its condition, like the disrepair of Rhoda's dwelling, registers the passage of time.

In its representation of Gertrude's condition, the television version of "The Withered Arm" inevitably has to make some sort of determination with respect to the ambiguous boundary between disability and illness. The shots of an arm affected by a dermatological pathology register the affliction as illness and yet Yvonne Antrobus's performance as Gertrude shows us a woman who is becoming disabled. In the scenes that follow the confrontation with Lodge, she becomes hunched and her gait changes. The use of costume also points more towards disability than illness inasmuch as the character is dressed in more voluminous clothes that conceal both changes to her body and to the way that it moves (see Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** In Yvonne Antrobus's interpretation of Gertrude, she becomes hunched as her condition moves from illness to disability. Screen capture



At the time Shubik was working on *Wessex Tales* she said of Thomas Hardy “His attitudes to women, religion and class could be those of now” (quoted in Pierce-Jones 2005: 66) and this view of the writer’s anticipation of a progressive view of the nexus of gender, patriarchy, and domesticity is perceptible in a costume drama that nevertheless feels at times like social commentary.

Of a piece with the vein of social commentary in Shubik’s oeuvre is the framing of Gertrude as a woman who is isolated, first by the lack of a defined role that comes with being Lodge’s wife, and then by not being able to resolve that perceived purposelessness by having a child. The filmed episode works within the parameters of the story inasmuch as there is a degree of ambiguity about the precise nature of what, if anything, happens between Rhoda and Gertrude on the night of the dreamed incubus. Shubik’s production, though, also traces the arc from Gertrude as a pretty and able-bodied new wife who is expected to be the mother of Lodge’s heir, to a hunched and childless figure in a way that begins to politicise the intersection of femininity and disability.

Garland-Thomson suggests that “If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle” (1997: 26). The transformation that Gertrude undergoes in Shubik’s version of the story dramatizes this shift from the gaze to the stare, and from the sexual to the grotesque. Reading this interpretation back into the story, and into the archaeology of critical metaphors, we could posit that the *grotesqueness* of the incubation scene is what matters: less relevant is whether this is about fantasy, or the Gothic, or psychoanalysis. When rendered for television, we see that Hardy’s superstition-laden incubus device serves to articulate the shift a woman undergoes, as she becomes disabled, from being an object of sexual spectacle to one of grotesque spectacle. We see through the adaptation’s modernising lens a narrative that is attentive to the intersections of disability and of gender, and which anticipates the critical challenges that disability studies poses for some feminist paradigms. In this interpretation of the story, it is less about disability and illness as metaphors for infertility than it is about the superstitious demonisation of childlessness and prejudices dictating that disabled women cannot or should not have children.

Louise Doughty’s adaptation of the story for radio, in 2007, follows the source text quite closely and, like the television adaptation, makes the question of Gertrude’s perceived infertility pivotal. The script adds dialogue to a conversation between Lodge and Gertrude in which he berates his new wife for gallivanting about the parish and tending to tragic cases: this lack of a clear role,

and the solitude of which Gertrude complains, will be fixed, her husband tells her, as soon as she produces an heir. The voices of farmworkers also amplify the sense that Gertrude is to be castigated for not falling pregnant: “The point of a cow is to calve”, one of them says, equating Gertrude with her husband’s livestock and also underscoring that as long as Mr. Lodge is without issue his wife has no perceived purpose in the community.

The radio adaptation, unlike Shubik’s production for television, gives us no sense of changes in Gertrude’s gait or in her posture, though, presumably, such developments could be produced with inventive sound effects. And, obviously, the radio adaptation cannot show us what Gertrude’s affliction looks like. The reactions of others to the sight of the arm, are, however, descriptive of the seriousness of the condition and of the revulsion it produces in those who look at it. Susan Jameson, as Rhoda, reacts with a phatic interjection best rendered as “Eugh!”, when Gertrude allows her to see the afflicted arm, a wordless, visceral reaction repeated later in the dramatization by another character. This adaptation, then, does not describe an arc between illness and disability so much as the version for television does. The effect of Gertrude’s chronic condition is registered not in movement or posture but in how the drama’s minor characters read changes to Gertrude’s appearance. In a gossipy conversation, one of these additional characters says of Gertrude “She’s a changed woman. Her face is twisted with it.”

The issue of how to register alterations in Gertrude’s physiology in this kind of adaptation (where the story unfolds in just under thirty minutes) may also account for the emphasis made by Gertrude in the radio play on a connection between her ailment and her childlessness. She says “I feel I’ve been cursed. I’m barren. And the arm is a part of it, I’m sure”. This dialogue makes the connection, as perceived by Gertrude, between her withering arm and not becoming pregnant, more explicit than it is in the story. Similarly, the script for the radio adaptation fastens on the question of childlessness as the sole motive for Gertrude’s recourse to superstitious remedies: “Unless I can find a cure, I will never have a child”. And, whereas the adaptation for television retains some sense of the narrative ellipsis in the story, the radio adaptation dispenses with it. “Only wed a year”, says Mr. Mason, of the deceased Gertrude, indicating that in this version of the story, the reduced period of time meant to have transpired means that the process of attrition is not only undescribed, or effectively redacted, as it is in the story, but is simply omitted. The adaptation for radio, then, is of necessity unable to become involved with the question of how the effects of illness, when multiplied by time, can become disability.

### 3 Conclusion

The first section of this chapter outlined a cross section of literary criticism of “The Withered Arm” that shows the continuous erasure of disability, and, to some extent, of illness, in the metaphorization of Gertrude’s condition. A question begged by this persistent feature of the criticism of “The Withered Arm” is whether it reflects a more general reluctance to read fiction through the politics of disability, or whether the literature on this particular story has singularly been bypassed by approaches informed by disability studies.

By reading Hardy’s story alongside adaptations of the text for television and for radio the chapter has sought to bring to the fore not only questions of disability but also the junctures embedded in the story between disability and gender. Bringing disability in the story out of its containment by metaphor allows sight of a picture where women are disabled by not conforming to prescribed roles, and where disability drives people to the occluded spaces and margins that are also familiar to those who are gender con-conformists. We also see in this reading of “The Withered Arm” the prejudices that envelop disabled maternity. Gertrude is disabled by the perceived lack of role that comes with her childlessness and she is also rendered childless either by her disability, or by the injunction against disabled women conceiving. The ambiguities in the story point to the obfuscating mechanisms that perpetuate the prejudice: Gertrude will not be told what is wrong with her; she will receive no diagnosis; there will be no certainty whether she cannot or should not have a child.

Instead, she is punished twice, firstly for not having a child, and secondly, for seeming to bring about the death of her husband’s illegitimate son. The childless woman without a role is not only disabled, but also disabling; not only infertile, but also a source of mortality. Her withered arm is presaged by the arm that hangs over Rhoda’s son in their home where “in the thatch [...] a rafter showed like a bone protruding through the skin” (Hardy 1920: 71). And both the withered arm and the bony protuberance breaking through the skin of Rhoda’s cottage anticipate the arm that makes up part of the structure of the ghastly apparatus for execution by hanging.

The withered arm, then, is linked organically in the story to mortality, a through-line that is demonstrative of longstanding (atavistic?) fears that disability is a harbinger of death. I would argue, however, that this skeletal structure not only represents deep seated anxieties about disability and mortality but also conveys a critique both of the executioner’s regime and of a social order that punishes and oppresses disability. By bringing Gertrude’s arm into contact with

the hanged neck of Rhoda's son, Hardy implies that where bodies and people found to be wrong must be broken, broken and non-normative bodies and people will also be perceived as wrong and immoral. Execution of the body, by hanging, and of the person, by prejudice, are equally barbaric.

## Filmography and Radio Adaptation

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