

**Cripplottation: Desire, the Gaze, and the Extraordinary Body
in *The History of Sir Richard Calmady***

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Introduction

<1>*The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901) is a book about a body. It is about the extraordinary body of its protagonist, Sir Richard Calmady.⁽¹⁾ Richard is afflicted by a curse, cast on his family in the distant past by a mistreated peasant woman, which decrees that all Calmady men will die young until one is born, “half-angel, half-monster,” who will atone for the wrongs of his philandering forefathers. Soon after the premature death of his own father, Richard is born with no lower legs, his feet attached to his thighs just above where the knee would have been.

<2>The novel focuses on Richard’s progress into adulthood, pursuing his various romances and narrating his anxieties about his sexual and reproductive future. His principal and most enduring romance is with his protective, passionate, and compelling mother, Katherine, who refuses to acknowledge his bodily difference openly. As a young man just out of university, however, he enters into an engagement with his innocent and unimaginative neighbor, Lady Constance Quayle. It eventually transpires that Constance has been forced into the engagement by her family, who are after Richard’s money, and that in fact she is and has always been horrified by Richard’s body. She finally breaks off the engagement to marry the athletic soldier Mr. Decies. Humiliated and embittered, Richard flees to the continent to live the life of a libertine, embarking on a period of debauchery which culminates in a steamy affair with his cousin, Helen, who has since childhood been infatuated by his extraordinary physique. After one night of passion with Helen, a chastened Richard returns to England, wracked by remorse and illness, to live a life of temperance devoted to good works. At this point he enters into a seemingly celibate marriage with his other cousin, Honoria, a proto-lesbian, proto-feminist character who wishes to contribute to Richard’s charitable endeavors. Richard and Honoria adopt the child of a near relative, rather than having their own children, and settle down to live happily ever after...with Katherine, who in fact appears to be the primary erotic object for both Richard and Honoria.

<3>The novel’s sustained and explicit account of Richard’s sexual experiences and desires renders it exceptional in the era of eugenics, when the sexuality of disabled people was a taboo subject. The book, therefore, like its protagonist, is a fascinating anomaly. It was a bestseller of

1901, only outsold by Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, and was written by Lucas Malet, who was a respected if controversial avant-garde writer, the daughter of the Victorian cultural leader Charles Kingsley. Both *Kim* and Malet's novel dwell with a kind of covetous fascination on boys on the brink of manhood, but while *Kim* has become a classic, *The History of Sir Richard Calmady*, despite its initial notoriety, drifted into utter obscurity during the first half of the twentieth century. It was only recovered recently due to a renewed interest in the works of noncanonical Victorian and Edwardian women writers. The contrasting fates of *Kim* and *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* invite reflection on the ways in which the politics of canonicity intertwines with the politics not only of gender but also of disability.

<4>The book's rediscovery coincides opportunely with the continuing growth of the academic field of disability studies, for which it offers inspiring and thought-provoking material. This novel deserves to be part of our developing disability studies canon; and yet it is hard to know what to do with it, for it manages to combine very intimately the radical and the deeply offensive. It thematizes and draws on the conventions of the freak show, describing Richard's body in visual terms and posing him in tableaux dripping with emotive significance, so that the novel as a whole becomes a kind of textual stage upon which Richard is displayed as a freak. Yet, the novel dwells on Richard's body with fascination, desire, and perhaps even love. Richard's body is its central object, the fine point upon which all its characters, histories, and themes coalesce; at the same time the fantasies that his body arouses diffuse through the text like the fog which so often surrounds its characters, infusing the imaginative world of the novel with an affect of melancholy, yearning passion. This novel's commitment to, its caress of, the disabled body is a rarity in the field of representations of disability, at least until recent years.

<5>The excessive presence and hyper-visibility with which Richard's body is invested in this novel evokes Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on disability and visual culture, offered in her discussions of freak shows and photography. Garland-Thomson observes that "The history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased" ("Politics" 56). In *Extraordinary Bodies*, her seminal book on freak shows, she argues that "the exhibited body became a text written in bold face to be deciphered according to the needs and desires of onlookers" (60). This transformation of body into text deprives the freak of subjectivity and power; "the body envelops and obliterates the freak's potential humanity" (59). Meanwhile the audience, in the position of interpreter, is empowered to make use of the freak as "a generalized icon of corporeal and cultural otherness" on which all kinds of fantasies and disavowals can be imposed (80). In "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," Garland-Thomson indicates how photography of disabled people draws on and develops from the freak show, offering opportunities to stare at the extraordinary body in an era when the freak show has become distasteful. She produces a powerful frame through which to approach visual images of disabled bodies by creating a set of four categories or "rhetorics" of images: the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic. She argues that while the first three rhetorics in turn evoke the distanced, privileged responses of amazement, pity, and desire, realistic representations "banish the strange and cultivate the ordinary, radically reimagining disability by installing people with disabilities in the realm of human commonality" (74).

<6>Garland-Thomson's work is a force for the cultural emancipation of disabled people who have for generations been assaulted and objectified by the able-bodied gaze, and an important aspect of her project appears to be a search for potentially empowering modes of representation, such as the realistic mode in photography. At the same time, Garland-Thomson's writing leaves hanging some intriguing loose ends and evocative asides that open up the possibility of exploring in detail the diverse and particular relationships that problematic or objectifying modes of representation foster between onlooker and spectacle. For example, although Garland-Thomson argues that the able-bodied gaze subjects and objectifies the disabled body, her description of the "visual relation" as "an awkward partnership that estranges and discomforts both viewer and viewed" destabilizes this paradigm, evoking a connection in which both parties are vulnerable ("Politics" 57). Meanwhile, she offers a particularly thought-provoking conception of the freak show when she remarks, "At the freak show, cultural self and cultural other hover silently for an historical instant, face to face in dim acknowledgement of their unspoken symbiosis" (*Extraordinary* 65). This striking image emphasizes not only hierarchy but also interdependence, and the moment of confrontation between the onlooker and the extraordinary body becomes a tense encounter that is both surreal and revelatory.

<7>*The History of Sir Richard Calmady*, with its intertwining of caress and contempt, is an invitation to follow some of these loose ends. It asks us to inhabit and reflect upon the strange intimacy of the relationship between the onlooker and the extraordinary body, demanding a reading that is indebted to fluid, psychoanalytically-nuanced work, such as Homi Bhabha's account of the agonized interdependency of the colonizer and the mimic-man.⁽²⁾ This novel describes and embodies a relationship between onlooker and extraordinary body that is characterized by an edgy breathlessness, encompassing both desire and hurt, both solicitation and retreat.

Visual Rhetorics in *The History of Sir Richard Calmady*

<8>Throughout *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* connections are drawn between Richard's body and practices of display. Richard's story is book-ended by paradigmatic encounters with two practices of spectacle and display, the freak show and the opera, and both of these encounters serve to suggest that Richard himself is at risk of being made an object of display. Indeed, the two encounters frame Richard's story just as conventions of display frame (imprison, interpret, and present) the extraordinary body.

<9>Early in the novel, the young Richard encounters a freak show when out riding. The show is part of a country fair which also displays captive animals, including a lion "weary of the rows of stolid English faces staring daily, hourly, between the bars of his foul and narrow cage, heart-sick with longing for sight of the open, starlit heaven and the white-domed, Moslem tombs amid the prickly, desert thickets and plains of clean, hot sand" (105). Riding past the fairground listening to the desolate roar of the lion, Richard sees the sign for the freak show. This image is not described, but it has a strong effect on Richard, leaving him with "a blind terror of insecurity, which, coursing through the boy's mind, filled him with agonised and angry pity towards all disgraced fellow-beings, all enslaved and captive beasts. Dimly he recognised his kinship to all such" (106). At several points later in the novel when he is experiencing moments of suffering,

Richard is again compared to the lion; at one point he is described as “a creature, captive, maimed, imprisoned, perpetually striving, perpetually frustrated in the effort to escape” (347). This repeated comparison draws us back to that first sight of the freak show, implying insistently that it is Richard’s physical difference that entraps him, imprisoning him in the gaze of the rows of stolid faces, like a fly congealed in amber.

<10>Towards the end of novel Richard experiences a rehabilitative moment of revelation that drives him to return to England and embark on a life of temperance and good works. Delirious with fever in his box at the opera in Naples, Richard imagines that the audience stares, not at the figures on the stage, but at him, and believes himself to be surrounded by “velvet-like, expressionless eyes. And all those eyes were fixed upon him, and him alone. He was the centre towards which, in thought and action, all turned” (329). This self-referential passage perfectly describes the way in which Malet has chosen to locate the extraordinary body in her novel. While Richard is represented as a character with a subjectivity, an approach that encourages the reader to identify with him and sympathize with his situation, the novel also participates in the forceful conventions of display that assault its hero. That is to say, it presents Richard’s body as a spectacle. Of course this is a somewhat paradoxical statement since the novel’s mode is language, not visual image. But through its cornucopia of descriptive passages (one of the features that make it as a whole so very lengthy), Malet’s novel seems to incorporate the dynamic developments in visual culture that were occurring at the turn of the nineteenth century. The novel repeatedly offers showpiece scenes that have an almost cinematic quality; and early cinema was at this time producing footage of disabled subjects, capitalizing on the tradition of display associated with them.

<11>In the following scene, for example, Honoria sees Richard standing in a doorway when she is collecting Constance from his home after Constance has broken off her engagement with him:

Suddenly the sharp peal of the bell, the opening of the door, the dragging of silken skirts, and hurrying of footsteps. —Honoriam gathered up her somewhat scattered courage and swung out into the hall. Lady Constance Quayle came towards her, groping, staggering, breathless, her face convulsed with weeping. But to this, for the moment, Miss St Quentin [Honoriam] paid small heed. For, at the far end of the hall, a bright light streamed out from the open doorway. And in the full glare of it stood a young man—his head, with its cap of close-cropped curls, proudly distinguished as that of some classic hero, his features the beautiful features of Katherine Calmady, his height but two-thirds the height a man of his make should be, his face drawn and livid as that of a corpse, his arms hanging down straight at his sides, his hands only just not touching the marble quarries of the floor on either side of him.

Honoriam uttered an exclamation of uncontrollable pity and horror, caught Constance Quayle by the arm, and hurried out into the moonlit square to the waiting carriage. (235)

The flurried, rapid action of the scene—the women making their escape—is halted with the sudden, contrasting, short sentence—“But to this, for the moment, Miss St Quentin paid small heed.” At this point action makes way for the stasis of portraiture, as Richard is described. The narrative is paused, as it were, to make way for a moment of visual contemplation of Richard’s

body. Aspects of his appearance that emphasize his physical difference are dwelt upon: his shortness of stature, and the way his hands almost reach the floor. Honoria is turned from actor into spectator, gazing on Richard's revealed bodily difference, and the reader is drawn into her emotions of "pity and horror." After offering the reader this emotive snapshot of Richard, the scene transforms itself again with Honoria's sudden cry, which breaks the silence and stillness of the moment. The characters abruptly return to their roles and the scene re-engages with the drama that is taking place. The image of Richard's body conveys the reader into a different place and time, outside the flow of the narrative, to experience the pregnant, ominous stillness of spectacle. The extraordinary body is constructed as inherently spectacular, wordless, antithetical to the developmental and discursive nature of narrative.

<12>In the example above, the representation of Richard's body participates in the sentimental visual rhetoric that Garland-Thomson has identified, soliciting a pitying attitude to Richard by modeling sympathy through Honoria. Yet, at the same time, the descriptive focus in this passage on the beauty of Richard's hair and face, and the long reach of his phallic arms, betrays Honoria's pity as alloyed with a more "uncontrollable" attraction, and complicates the response demanded from the reader. The construction, in this novel, of the extraordinary body as an object of desire becomes particularly evident in passages where Helen is the agent of the gaze – the gaze to which Richard is subjected, and into which the reader is initiated. In these passages the text adopts a rhetoric that we can categorize, again following Garland-Thomson, as exotic: a mode that "presents disabled figures as alien, distant, often sensationalized, eroticized, or entertaining in their difference," making "the disabled figure large, strange, and unlike the viewer" ("Politics" 65-6).

<13>The following exoticizing passage, for example, occurs during a scene where Richard and Helen are lunching together in his garden at Naples:

Silently he slipped down from his chair, stood a moment, supporting himself with one hand on the edge of the table, and then moved forward to that side of the pavilion which gave upon the garden. Here the sunshine was hot upon the pavement, and upon the outer half of each pale, slender column. Richard leant his shoulder against one of these, grateful for the genial heat.

Since her first and somewhat inauspicious meeting with him in childhood, Helen had never, close at hand, seen Richard Calmady walk thus far. She stared, fascinated by that cruel spectacle. For the instant transformation of the apparently tall, and conspicuously well-favoured, courtly gentleman, just now sitting at table with her, into this shuffling, long-armed, crippled dwarf was, at first utterly incredible, then portentous, then, by virtue of its very monstrosity, absorbing and, to her, adorable, whetting appetite as a veritable famine might. (297)

In this passage, as in the one with Honoria above, the action of the scene (which in this case is the dialogue between Richard and Helen) is suspended when Richard silently takes his pose – a choreographed, static pose which distances him from the onlooker, placing him in the remote, unreachable space of the spectacle. His shortness of stature is exaggerated through the contrast

between his body and the tall slenderness of the column against which he leans, just as, in freak shows, dwarves were often paired with giants to emphasize, through contrast, their respective heights. The passage then enters into Helen's consciousness, inviting the reader to participate in Helen's absorption in and fascination with the sight of Richard's body. In Helen's visual field, Richard's figure is further enlarged and exaggerated, as he becomes "this shuffling, long-armed, crippled dwarf" and Helen revels in the visual pleasure that the experience of staring at Richard offers, acknowledging him as an object of desire.

<14>Helen's exoticizing vision creates, in Garland-Thomson's words, "a sensationalized, embellished alien" ("Politics" 66). Garland-Thomson argues that the exotic "reproduces an ethnographic model of viewing characterized by curiosity or uninvolved objectification"; and yet this passage suggests that desire carries a cost for its agent as well as its object ("Politics" 65). Even while Helen asserts her own power and privilege by objectifying Richard, the chaotic flurry of emotions that she experiences at the sight of him (fascination, absorption, starvation) evokes that loss of agency, indicating that in her desire to possess Richard, Helen risks losing possession of herself. It is in this current, the play of desire, the novel invites us to understand and experience the relationship between onlooker and extraordinary body as radically unstable and ambivalent.

Desire, "cripsploitation," and the gaze

<15>The complexity of the relationship between onlooker and extraordinary body in this novel is best illustrated through contrast with a strikingly stable model of a hierarchical visual relationship. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, while discussing how the freak's body can be "fixed" by the gaze of the observer, refers to John Tagg's account of Victorian photographs of social deviants used in medical and social case studies: "the body isolated; the narrow space; the subjugation to an unreturnable gaze; the scrutiny of gestures, faces, and features; the clarity of illumination and sharpness of focus" (62). Tagg's description starkly indicates the disempowerment of the deviant in the context of a specific visual practice, and Garland-Thomson analogizes medical photography to the freak show to indicate the disempowerment of the freak. The very starkness of the images described by Tagg, however—their lack of adornment in terms of costume and spiels, their insistence, indeed, on naked "truth" over myth, narrative, and fantasy—differentiates them from the freak show, which depended on story and visual embellishment. Malet's novel, if we read it as a solicitation to or embodiment of one kind of gaze that might have been turned upon the extraordinary body, suggests that while the medical specimen is naked and exposed, the extraordinary body may in particular instances constitute a more mysterious object, continuously receding from a yearning gaze that does not know, but desires it.

<16>The idea of the freak or the extraordinary body as a desired but ever-receding visual object is suggested by the representation of Richard's body. Even while the novel discusses the theme of display and creates Richard's body as an object of display, it simultaneously maintains a level of secretiveness and coyness about Richard's body that leaves both characters and reader with a sense of mystery about that body. Richard is described approvingly as having a "wholesome pride" which is manifested in his "carefulness to avoid all exposure of his deformity" (194).

Richard's desire to avoid exposure of his legs and feet leads him to cover them all the time with rugs and blankets that are tantalizingly inadequate to their task: "He leaned sideways, stretching out to a neighbouring chair with his right hand, keeping the light, silk-woven, red blanket up across his thighs with his left" (217); "He turned on his elbow restlessly, and the movement altered the lie of the bedclothes, thereby disclosing the unsightly disproportion of his person through the light blanket and sheet" (199); and so on. In a novel that emphasizes the visual, and presents the reader with visual tableaux of Richard, it is striking that there is very little in the way of detailed visual description specifically of Richard's legs and feet. This visual reticence is supported by the narrative choices made in the text. For example, when a doctor visits Richard's home to try various medical prostheses on him, the narrative focuses not on Richard and the doctor, but rather on Richard's mother as she waits outside Richard's room. Thus the text refuses to allow the reader to witness certain passages in Richard's history that would reveal his body at too-close quarters. What is offered in this novel is not the money-shot, but the burlesque dancer's play with fans and feathers—only in this perpetually repeated strip-tease act, the props are rugs and blankets. Richard's body comes to represent, not the painfully, contemptibly, knowable and known (the object of the medical photograph in Tagg's account), but rather, the realm of the unknown and perhaps unknowable: the unthinkable experience and bewildering flesh of a unique and extraordinary being.

<17>For the amorous Helen, in this situation of visual dearth, even the outline of Richard's body, tantalizingly glimpsed through its various coverings, offers a drop of water in the desert: "her eyes, following down the lines of the fur rug, received renewed assurance of the fact of his deformity—hidden as far as might be, with decent pride, yet there, permanent and unalterable" (159). Helen is a self-conscious aesthete who not only desires and seduces Richard but also, throughout the novel, offers a meta-textual commentary on her own activities. Her interior monologue thus delineates in very suggestive terms the kind of desire that Richard's body arouses. She observes that "the man before her, by his very abnormality and a certain secretness inevitable in that, heightened her passion. He was to her of all living men most desirable, so that she must win him and hold him, must see and know" (298). The "secretness" of Richard's body produces a desire to "see and know," but this desire is not the intellectual curiosity of the dispassionate scientist or medical photographer; it is passionate, urgent, and physical. It seeks not principles but experience, not objectivity but intimacy: it requires not only to see and know its object, but also to approach it, to caress it, to hold it. Far from accepting the distinction between privileged self and subjugated other, Helen longs to break the barrier between freak and audience—to climb up onto the stage with Richard.

<18>We could describe Helen's desire as a kind of passionate prurience. "Prurience" is defined in the OED as "Lasciviousness, lewdness; excessive fascination with or curiosity about sexual matters" and as "Excessive or inappropriate desire or curiosity," and we will do well to bear in mind this interdependency of the experiences of desire and curiosity, to which the word "prurience" alerts us, as we seek to understand the gazes that pursue the disabled body, and the relation between disability and sexuality. The meaning of the word "prurience," however, stems from the experience, to which the word referred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of "having an itching or longing." This older meaning seems to haunt Helen's prurience, which stems from the sense of longing that Richard's ever-receding body produces in her. The repeated loss of the sight of his body, as it is wrapped in blankets and concealed under rugs, creates a lack

that incites her curious desire. Her interior monologue renders in text the gaze that Richard attracts. This gaze encompasses, not the orgy of visual explicitness offered by the well-lit medical photograph, but rather a failing struggle to capture moving shadows, to bring blurred images into focus, to grasp at objects receding into the darkness. It is a gaze whose affect emphasizes blindness and loss. Thus the novel repeatedly conveys the experience of sexual arousal through metaphors of visual disorientation, developing an erotic language that depends on the idea of impairment (and thereby emphasizing the ways in which conventional discourse about desire relies on the notion of disability, in its old adage that “love is blind” and its centering of the figure of blind Cupid).

<19>Helen openly expresses her desire to Richard, telling him:

I do not say it would affect all women alike [. . .] But there remain the elect, Richard, among whom I dare count myself. And over them, never doubt it, just that which you hate and which appears at first sight to separate you so cruelly from other men, gives you a strange empire. You stimulate, you arrest, you satisfy one’s imagination, as does the spectacle of some great drama. [. . .] I saw you, and so doing I saw mysteries of joy in myself unimagined by me before. (306-7)

The act of imagining is referred to twice in this passage, and is repeatedly mentioned, particularly by Helen, throughout the novel. The mystery, the loss, of Richard’s body acts upon the imagination, stimulates it as though it were a sexual organ. The imagination fills in narrative gaps that the half-hidden body leaves empty. Desire must complete the body; not to make it “whole” again, but to make it reveal itself, to make it speak. Thus when Helen gazes on Richard’s partly covered body, in her imagination she (re-)creates Richard’s “deformity” for herself from the imprecise form outlined by the rug that covers him.

<20>The entire novel could be read as an expression of the affect of loss, and the resulting compulsion to embellish, that characterizes this gaze. By its very existence this unfashionably (for its time) prolix novel bears witness to a compulsion to plug up gaps in experience, and substitute unattainable intimacies, with great wads of imaginative work, of narrative. In its insistence on “the honest depiction of aspects of life heretofore considered too repulsive for the novel” (Schaffer xvi) the novel draws on the naturalism of Zola and Gissing. Yet that naturalism takes on an unexpected edge if we think of its explicitness as the expression not of social conscience but of desire, the obsessive weaving of narrative prostheses to fill out the image of a cherished but mysterious body. The novel’s naturalism is inflected by the opium-soaked, entranced logic of aestheticism, whose style it adopts; it dwells with a kind of acquisitive wonder on Richard’s body just as Dorian Gray gazes, mesmerized, at his precious gems and embroidered cloths. This Peeping Tom of a novel looks upon the extraordinary body with a yearning gaze and caresses it with a trembling, covetous, nervously aggressive hand, and in so doing it invites us to re-theorize the gaze of the freak show spectator and, more broadly, to reconsider the relationship between disability, desire, and visual culture.

<21>The small example of Helen’s imaginative recreation of Richard’s blanketed body encapsulates the impulse behind, the meaning of, Helen’s much grander and more complex

flights of fantasy about Richard, the “spectacle of some great drama” that he evokes in her mind. And yet, as in Helen’s admission of her fascination quoted above, the content of Helen’s grandiose fantasies is left vague and nebulous. It is not clear what is at stake for Helen in the matter of Richard’s body. Rather, the “great drama” of Helen’s imagination exists in the novel as a kind of floating place-holder, marking off a space of ludic fantasy. Helen’s response to her imaginings, however, is more explicitly depicted. Helen is “Fired by [. . .] thoughts” of Richard. They “filled her with a certain intoxication, a voluptuous self-love [. . .] . She caressed her own neck, her own lips, with lingering finger-tips. She bent her bright head and kissed the swell of her cuplike breasts” (260). She pleasures herself with her imagination.

<22>The explicit association made between imagination and masturbation through Helen’s character raises a self-referential question about the purpose of the novel, itself a work of imagination; about its genre, we might say. Helen is no stranger to stimulating fictions. She thinks mischievously of scandalizing lady tourists in Italy by suggesting that they “increase their knowledge of the Italian character and language by study of the *Novelle of Bandello*” (259), a sixteenth-century collection of bawdy tales. Her maid reads a “yellow-paper-covered novel” while waiting for Helen on the steps of a church: the yellow cover would, in the 1890s, have suggested sexually explicit French fiction. Moreover, Helen is also familiar with the corrupting literature of her lover, the debauched poet Destournelles, whose “technique is as amazingly clever as his thought is amazingly rotten” (296). Helen, the figure in the novel who represents the practice of generating narrative, herself produces not high art but masturbatory fantasies, and her favorite works of imaginative writing occupy a place, not in the lofty canon of literature, but in the soiled boudoir of trash, profanity, and smut.

<23>Helen’s presence as a proxy author-figure facilitates a tacit admission that the novel itself has the potential to be ensconced within the curtains of that tawdry boudoir. The novel engages in a practice, for which I use the term “cripsploitation,” where it makes use of certain qualities specifically associated with the extraordinary body for the purpose of titillation; it is, in this sense, a work of pornography. The ever-receding extraordinary body produces a desire stemming from experiences of loss and lack, while, at the same time, the secrecy surrounding this body leaves it open to interpretation, eminently textualizable, inviting the elaboration and embellishment that can fill the gap of desire. Thus the extraordinary body opens up the expansive space of pleasure-oriented fantasy, the space of Helen’s “great drama.”

<24>One night, sitting indoors in a lighted room, Helen gazes upon Richard standing on the dark balcony of his house in Naples:

slowly she raised her downcast eyes and looked after Richard Calmady, his figure a blackness, as of vacancy, against the elaborate wrought-ironwork of the balcony. And so doing, an adorable sensation moved her, at once of hungry tenderness and of fear — fear of something unknown, in a way fundamental, incalculable, the like of which she had never experienced before. (305)

This image encapsulates the way in which Richard’s body comes to operate as a placeholder, a chalk outline, a blank space or page on which the wildest narratives of perverse fantasy can be

written and rewritten without end. Like a prairie or a tundra, the “strange empire” that Richard’s body represents for Helen is a vast, empty, and unknown space, eerie and at the same time redolent with a sense of possibility, enticing to a colonizing imagination.⁽³⁾ Or we might imagine the “strange empire” of the extraordinary body as a keyhole: that dark shape outlined against the door, that tiny, innocent aperture that, for the voyeur, coyly implies unlimited salacious possibilities. *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* is just one fantasy, one “great drama,” emanating from this productive space.

<25>Through its investment in the desire incited by the extraordinary body, the novel throws light on the potentially pornographic pleasures offered by the freak show and, more broadly, the powerful and perhaps transgressive sexual resonance of the extraordinary body. The location of Richard’s body not only outside of, but also in opposition to, normative sexuality is indicated by the way in which the presence of his body disrupts the flow of the narrative in the novel. It has already been observed that the novel contains spaces outside the narrative when the text moves into a descriptive mode, conveying striking, theatrical tableaux of Richard’s body that recall the freak show. These interludes represent the space of the spectacle, which introduces a moment of stillness and absorption. These ecstatic moments are contrasted with the conventional narratives that interweave with them: the stories of minor characters who obey the dictates of the marriage plot, bear (able-bodied) children, and generally participate in the dynamic, forward moving time of progress, maturation, production, reproduction, and linear narrative development.

<26>It is claimed repeatedly throughout the novel that the tragedy of Richard’s life is that his physical difference debar him from participating in this (re)productive time of linear narrative. Yet in another sense Richard’s location outside of this time indicates the potential that attaches to his physical difference. Moments in the novel that step outside the narrative of normalcy offer a respite from its forceful flow, an escape from its narrow bounds. Adopting the queer cultural strategy of turning an experience of loss or humiliation into an opportunity for play, such moments of reprieve and adjournment reject the hetero-normative for the heterodox and speak of the possibilities of fantasy, desire, and pleasure. These spectacular moments allow us to read the extraordinary body as a queer body and to see the spectacle as an intimation of immanence and potential. *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* invites us to explore the “strange empire” of the extraordinary body: the territory of the spectacle, a location outside of progressive time and linear narrative where the extraordinary body incites the desire and destabilizes the identity of the spectator, and initiates counter-cultural ways of seeing social and sexual worlds.

<27>By way of ending we might return to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s statement that “[T]he history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display.” Another way of describing this inheritance would be to say that representations of the disabled body, and conventions of representation of the disabled body, are often cripsploitative, pornographic. Garland-Thomson argues that the situation of being on display is that of “being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased.” Malet’s novel, however, asks us to re-evaluate our expectations of cripsploitative images, of the prurient, the smutty, and the obscene: to consider the possibility that pornography might have the capacity to give voice to a social critique (Garland-Thomson, “Politics” 56).

Endnotes

(1)The useful phrase “extraordinary body,” coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, refers to bodies that we commonly describe as “disabled,” and that have in the past been called “disfigured”: bodies that transgress or exceed, and have the capacity to call into question, culturally constructed definitions of the norm, the “ordinary.”(^)

(2)See Bhabha 85-92.(^)

(3)I use the word “colonizing” to draw attention to the colonial resonances of Helen’s phrase “a strange empire.” The interplay between race, nation, and the extraordinary body in this novel is a topic that would reward further research and analysis.(^)

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