

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 43 (2023)  
  
**Artikel:** The veteran's body : Cry Havoc! and recognizing disability in Shakespeare's histories  
**Autor:** Pivetti, Kyle  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1047008>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 12.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

KYLE PIVETTI  
NORWICH UNIVERSITY

## The Veteran's Body: *Cry Havoc!* and Recognising Disability in Shakespeare's Histories

In his one-man show *Cry Havoc!* (2012), American war veteran Stephan Wolfert recounts the night he goes Absent Without Leave (AWOL) and stumbles into a 1991 local production of William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Wolfert links Richard's physical disability to the veteran's experience and he discovers how the veteran's trauma is rendered shameful. This essay follows Wolfert's implications to reveal how Shakespeare's plays grapple with 'disability' and 'disorder' in the form of the veteran. Wolfert goes on to compare Shakespeare's characters to Henry Lincoln Johnson, a Black American awarded the French Cross of War for service in WWI. Wolfert describes Johnson as the "American Coriolanus," a violent and traumatised soldier who returns to a civilian life of segregation and tragedy. He represents the veteran upon whom the national vision depends while his shameful exile also serves to foster the collective. I argue that these veteran figures present a paradox: the veteran creates the nation through being shamed and denied by that nation.

Keywords: disability, trauma, veteran, history plays, race

It starts with Richard. In his 2012 autobiographical one-man show *Cry Havoc!*, Gulf War veteran Stephan Wolfert recounts the night he goes Absent Without Leave (AWOL) and wanders into a 1991 community production of *Richard III*. Watching Shakespeare's primary figure of disability, the American veteran recognises his own history of injury and military service. Wolfert recounts, "Like me, deformed, he even had the same posture I had when I was paralyzed in high school, to the right and slightly back, and like me, in spite of our deformities, joining the military and excelling, and like me, finding that that military service is probably now over" (12).<sup>1</sup> From this point, Wolfert weaves together his own biography

---

<sup>1</sup> I thank Stephan Wolfert for the generous permission to quote from the manuscript of *Cry Havoc!*. For more information, please visit [decruit.org](http://decruit.org).

with snippets of Shakespeare, as if the plays interrupt and intrude upon Wolfert's memories. Commenting on violence in the Iraq invasion, he slips into Antony. Thinking of his night terrors upon returning from the Gulf War, Wolfert breaks into Lady Hotspur's worries over her husband. In effect, *Cry Havoc!* shows that Shakespeare's soldiers do not remain in the early modern period; their afterlives persist into the twenty-first century and resonate with the veterans of today.

*Cry Havoc!* has been featured in *The New York Times*, has earned awards from theatre groups and mental health organisations alike, and has been performed for years both nationally and internationally (Collins-Hughes). The show's Shakespearean structure also inspires the treatment programme Wolfert has since developed, called DECRUIT. In collaboration with New York University psychologist Alisha Ali, Wolfert uses recitations of Shakespeare to treat trauma in veterans, finding that such performance can transform triggering thought patterns (Ali et al.).

This essay considers the insights into disability and national identity afforded by the dramatic structures of *Cry Havoc!*. Wolfert offers a portrait of both physical and psychological trauma, one revealing the operations of the other. But he also points back at Shakespeare's canon, drawing upon the treatment of veterans across the plays and in early modern English culture. Indeed, Wolfert's adaptation of Shakespeare illuminates a paradox in the treatment of veterans and disability. The veteran's past and his associated disability are rendered incomprehensible in the play's structure; in fact, they become a subject of embarrassment and shame. At the same time, the veteran's experience, his embodiment of traumatic memories, becomes necessary for a vision of collective nationhood.

Although this contradiction proves difficult and perplexing, it derives from the workings of affect, or the emotional exchanges that often defy rationality. I draw on Eve Sedgwick, who began her study of affect with shame and on the work of psychologist Sylvan Tompkins. Shame, she finds, plays a profoundly isolating role, turning physical and behavioural characteristics into the source of rejection. Yet at the same time, shame also depends upon a public body who witnesses and even identifies with that same isolation. Sedgwick writes in *Touching Feeling*, "That's the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality" (37). An exchange is at work; the individual who is rejected also confers the embarrassment of their being onto those who enact the very persecution. In fact, Sedgwick goes on to describe shame in dramatic terms, as if the shamed figure depended upon the audience as an identifiable collective. Sedgwick continues, "Shame, it might

finally be said, transformational shame, is performance. I mean theatrical performance” (38). If one is subject to a critical gaze, then those who gaze also partake in the performance, and political identity follows from this interchange between audience and actor. At stake are the values, behaviours, and the abilities deemed acceptable by audience and actor alike. When Sarah Ahmed extends Sedgwick’s notions of affect to national politics, she also makes a place for shame, arguing that, “What is striking is how shame becomes not only a mode of recognition of injustices committed against others, but also a form of nation building. It is shame that allows us ‘to assert our identity as a nation’” (112). These undercurrents run throughout *Cry Havoc!* as Wolfert recounts the injuries and trauma inflicted upon the veteran, both creating a sense of embarrassment the public body seeks to erase. We will find, though, that the same public body invites the performance of embarrassment; it depends upon the veteran as much as it writes off the body as unacceptable, a fraud, or simply unfitting for national celebration.

## 1 Wolfert’s Adaptation of Shakespeare

In its first moments, *Cry Havoc!* invites the veteran onstage while simultaneously signalling his isolation and incoherence. Wolfert opens with a direct quote from Richard III: “Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this” (2). He allows the sentence to linger, unfinished in a pattern that will continue throughout *Cry Havoc!*. Made glorious summer by what? Instead of finishing the thought, Wolfert switches to his own experiences and describes the night he deserted the Army, riding on the top of a train through Montana and wondering what a career soldier, like Richard, should do next. If his winter of discontent – serving in times of war – is over, it too is followed by lingering confusion.

In starting with Richard, Wolfert chooses a Shakespearean veteran with a specific critical legacy. Rather than the heroic Henry V or brave Hotspur, Wolfert selects the villain most associated with disfigurement and criminality. Indeed, a foundational essay of Disability Studies, Leonard Kriegel’s 1987 “The Cripple in Literature,” begins with the paradox of Shakespeare’s infamous king. Richard offers the “two fundamental images that cripples are accorded in Western literature” (32). His crutches “are transformed into a weapon [...] designed to impose the crippled king’s presence upon both his world and the audience” (32), yet Richard’s body is also rendered pathetic in his climb to the throne. According to



Kriegel, "The cripple is threat and recipient of compassion, both to be damned and to be pitied – and frequently to be damned as he is pitied" (32). Richard does not simply appear here as a monster; the audience also indulges in witnessing that body as something affective. David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder similarly turn to Richard as an interpretive crux in their landmark *Narrative Prosthesis*. The king demonstrates "a late Renaissance perspective on the narrative mutability of disability" (101), meaning that he self-consciously manipulates what his disability signifies throughout the play. He "sets to work performing disability" (112). In *Cry Havoc!*, Wolfert watches this performance and turns the interpretive process upon himself; he links physical ability to the veteran's experience. If Richard's back presents a myriad of conflicting meanings, Wolfert treats it as an image of personal trauma, national conflict, and a shared shame that defies easy integration.

When Wolfert first sees Richard, he witnesses a reflection of his own confused physical and emotional identity. He recounts a traumatic wrestling practice in his freshman year of high school, when another student "flexes me over his back like a rag doll. Jumps up in the air and body slams me on the mat. Tears my diaphragm. Contuses my spine in two spots" (4). The injury leaves Wolfert in a rehabilitation ward, where he joins senior citizens recovering from strokes. The young male teenager is suddenly made elderly. Years later, when Wolfert goes AWOL from his time in the service, he disrupts another boundary, now a soldier but not a soldier. He stumbles into a local Montana theatre to first see Richard limp onto the stage with the same back injury, and immediately identifies with him. In performance, Wolfert then slips into Richard's opening monologue: "Deformed. Unfinished. Sent before my time / Into this breathing world scarce half made up. / And that, so lamely and unfashionable / That dogs bark at me as I halt by them" (11). The language reflects Wolfert's emotional and physical state, drawing the two veterans together across centuries. Richard is the primary example of disability in Shakespearean literature – in fact, he is a nexus of disability in all of English literary studies. Wolfert instinctively seizes onto this significance; he discovers the disabled subject who will not find "the glorious summer" all that glorious, who will not fit into the collective nation celebrating its moment of peace.

Wolfert's one-man show continues through his military experiences, with the intrusion of Shakespearean language throughout. Richard's 'deformity' becomes a recurrent metaphor for psychological injury, and here Wolfert insists upon a collective (albeit repressed) experience. For in-

stance, he describes his military training as a process of overcoming natural human empathy. He cites studies indicating that only ten to fifteen percent of soldiers shoot with the intent to kill. “If we were wired to kill automatically,” he argues, “why would our military have to spend this much time, money, and resources on training us to kill?” (19.) His military training, then, involved transformation from natural humanity to something else. To become a killer, the soldier must assume the violent instincts of Shakespeare’s most aggressive, most ruthless villains. As Wolfert gives the account, he abruptly transitions into lines from *Coriolanus*: “But I’m just telling you the truth as I know it and the men and women that I’ve served with and have been working with for the past twenty years know it. The deeds of Coriolanus / Should not be utter’d feebly [...] He was a thing of blood, whose every motion was timed with dying cries” (Wolfert 24–25). Shakespearean allusions intrude upon the biography, speak back to the veteran’s experience, and shape it in the same breath. Wolfert’s life story becomes an assemblage of traumatic moments interwoven with lines that force uncomfortable comparisons. Coriolanus is a “thing of blood” and Richard a monstrous villain; Wolfert encompasses them all.

Wolfert’s formal constructions also mimic the psychological experiences of trauma, or what Cathy Caruth describes as the “delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena” (181). These traumatic patterns of flashback eschew narrative logic in a similar manner to how Wolfert’s narrative slips into the language of early modern drama. In fact, Patricia Cahill sees that same refusal across the genre of the Elizabethan history play: “the formal strategies of many Elizabethan war dramas – including the ways in which they offer visual and aural flashbacks and the ways in which they seem, in effect to draw a blank – offer a stunning register of traumatic possession” (8–9). Wolfert borrows from those same war dramas to create a pastiche of his own biography, born to alcoholic parents, abused by his brothers, enlisted after high school, and attacked by friendly fire in a moment of especially devastating tragic irony. In recounting the episodes that inform his psychological disability, he continuously slips into Hotspur, Henry, Coriolanus, or Falstaff. These abrupt transitions create the “aural flashbacks” linking traumatised veterans across historical eras.

Other repetitions echo throughout *Cry Havoc!* and compound the effects of ‘aural flashbacks’; Ato Quayson describes “aesthetic nervousness” as a mode in which “the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability” (15). While

Wolfert's flitting between characters begins this work, he also turns to sound effects and gestures that further disrupt the narrative. He describes a training exercise gone wrong, when live rounds bounce through a Hum-vee and strike the face of Wolfert's best friend. Wolfert uses a sound effect, "Pfffffft," and cradles the falling body in pantomime. Wolfert repeats the gesture throughout the show, turning to the opposite side of the stage and mimicking the intrusive flashbacks of Post-Traumatic Stress. In one example, he says of his daily experience, "Every Doritos bag possibly being a [Pffft]IED" (22). The small habits of life become triggering reminders of violence and injury, and in the course of *Cry Havoc!*, both gesture and sound refuse narrative progress. Wolfert also returns to the sound to indicate the collective trauma implicit in any wartime casualty. He says of troops in Afghanistan, "Lead vehicle, as happens so often, but we saw so rarely on TV, [pfffffft] disintegrated by an IED, Improvised Explosive Device" (20). He recounts the American troops who perpetuated the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam: "And one day [Pffft] one too many of their brothers were killed" (24). The reiteration does not excuse the atrocities of American troops; it builds in the recurrence of trauma and prevents healing.

While early modern writers did not share our contemporary definitions of trauma, the psychological effects of such disability register in other means. In Zackariah Long's essay on early modern trauma, he finds the guilty conscience or the pained soul as expressions of disturbed memory. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Long's main example is *Richard III*. He describes Shakespeare's play as "the story of one soldier's traumatic conscience," insisting that "the first atrocities [Richard] commits are as part of a military conflict, the War of Roses" (60–61). Just as Wolfert instantly recognised, Richard is a veteran. His murderous crimes follow from his first encounters with legitimised violence. Long finds the most overpowering images of trauma in Richard's midnight encounters with the ghosts of his victims, a scene in which dreams merge with Richard's reality. He is literally haunted by the manifestations of his fallen religious state. Long argues that this spiritual condition maps onto what modern psychology views as the post-traumatic subject. A somewhat sympathetic portrait follows, in which "the traumatic personal consequences of Richard's physical deformities and the social humiliation he suffers because of them" tragically drive his acts of evil (68). In the moment of haunting, Richard also hears from the two dead princes, who give an emotional warning: "Let us be lead within thy bosom, Richard, / And weigh thee down to shame, ruin, and death" (5.5.101–102). They invoke

his humiliation, here returned as necessary shaming. When Richard awakes, that prediction quickly comes true in Richard's self-accusations. He says, "I rather hate myself / For hateful deeds committed by myself. / I am a villain" (5.5.143–145). Richard, in other words, suffers psychological as well as physical disability and shame attaches to both. His frame of reference may derive from the religious language of conscience and soul, but he experiences trauma – and its shame – nonetheless.

These midnight hauntings resonate with Wolfert, who describes his midnight terrors by once again quoting *Richard III*. "Soft! I did but dream. / O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!" (30), Wolfert repeats as he delves into the experience of traumatised dreaming. He explains, "Even fifteen years after I got out of the military I didn't sleep right. I would get about two and a half, four and a half, and on a really good night, maybe five or six, if I drank enough" (30). He does not give details of the dreams, only calling one a "doosey" (30), and describing it in violent sound effects and screams. And, as with Richard, Wolfert's ghosts bring the attendant experience of shame. He continues, "And I would rarely spend more than a couple nights in a row next to a young lady cause I'd beaten, bobbed, and thumped several. I even choked a couple. It's dangerous. Impossible to explain. And embarrassing" (30). Like Richard, Wolfert finds himself aberrant and feels shame at the aberrance. Wolfert reveals, then, the veteran's body as a site of traumatic disability. His invocations of wars in Afghanistan and Vietnam distribute that trauma to the collective, a series of sound effects and gestures that are shared yet impossible to explain. Wolfert thus arrives at his thesis, and the motivating principle behind his treatment programmes: healing requires social reintegration, a community gesture welcoming veterans back into social rituals, into safety, and by implication into normativity. Hence the name of his organization, DECRUIT. The alternative he imagines is one of enduring exile and implicit shame. "And I'm the veteran who's so afraid of my war wiring I leave everything behind," he says. "You probably stepped over me on the corner on the way here. I have my piss-soaked pants and tattered cardboard sign that reads: I'm a vet. Please help [...] Oh sorry. Don't. [Sniff] Oh god you stink. Don't look me in the eyes" (34). To quote Allison Hobgood and David Houston Wood, "normativity requires and rewards the repression or forgetting of disability difference" (3). In Wolfert's vision of the shunned exile, the veteran is forgotten and treated as the object of embarrassment. And the way Wolfert constructs his play invokes a series of veterans the collective would rather

treat as aberrations and embarrassments, from Richard III through the American soldiers of the 20th and 21st centuries.

## 2 The Post-Service Life of Early Modern Soldiers

While Wolfert uses Shakespeare to illuminate the present-day conditions of traumatised subjects, he also invites the audience to witness the same repressions and erasures at work in Shakespeare's own period. As Linda Bradley Salamon shows, the category of veteran in the period developed slowly, yet "the men themselves existed, performing violent tasks deemed necessary by their society, and many of them were subsequently abandoned to poverty, hunger, and disability" (262). Those soldiers who did not die afield – or who did not return whole – became a cultural deviation. Or worse, they were rendered parasites and con-artists in a recurrent trope of the period's pamphlets. In the example of Thomas Harman, author of *A Caveat for Common Cursetors* (1567), any true soldier would never stoop to begging. He writes,

For be well assured that hardist souldiers be eyther slayne or maimed, eyther and they escape all hassardes, and retourne home agayne, if they bee without reliefe of their friends, they will surely desperatly robbe, and steale, and eyther shortlye be hanged or miserably dye in pryson, for they be so much ashamed and disdayne to beg or aske charity. (11)

Either he dies at war, or he faces execution. In any case, the veteran is eliminated. Notably, for the veteran to ask for assistance amounts to an implicit admission of shame. If these figures performed the "violent tasks deemed necessary by their society," they also feel the resultant shame made necessary by their society.

Harman's dismissal of the disabled veteran signals a significant trend of the culture. Soldiers clearly returned from wars with debilitating injuries, but they could also be dismissed through other means. In her book *Dissembling Disability*, Lindsey Row-Heyveld tracks a social pattern of the period in which disability is continually treated as a scheme to get undeserved relief from almsgivers. She contends, "The fear of counterfeit disability was pervasive and influential in early modern England, and [...] served as the primary justification for the increasing institutionalization of poor relief throughout the period" (3). As poverty increased in the period through population growth, enclosure, and other historical developments, so too did suspicion about poverty relief. Fear of imposters, then, justified

removing charity from the hands of the individual – someone offering relief to a beggar was no longer seen as charitable but instead foolish. Row-Heyveld offers a litany of period sources that give such warnings and finds numerous examples of the trope played out on stage, where characters feign disability for ulterior motives. Once more, a paradox appears. As Row-Heyvald puts it, “Physical impairment became the primary attribute deserving of charity and, simultaneously, the primary characteristic to invite suspicion about the need for such charity” (9). The disabled become a group of imposters, better left ignored.

In the plays of the period, the veteran often appears with similarly fraught attitudes. Linda Woodbridge gives a survey of demobilised soldiers appearing in plays of the early modern period, suggesting that the public theatre does evince some sympathy with the plight of the vagrant soldier, as in the case of Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (52–54). However, the question of sympathy remains a complicated one. For instance, Woodbridge cites *Henry V* for its compassionate understanding of the troops’ experiences, yet the play often gives split images of the veteran. When Henry delivers the ‘Band of Brothers’ speech, he imagines the aging soldier looking back fondly on his wartime accomplishments and joining a masculine national collective: “he today that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother” and “this day shall gentle his condition” (4.3.61–63). Military service, and injury, contributes to a masculine, English collective.

The concluding action of the play contradicts that ideal. As Woodbridge notes, the common soldier Pistol leaves the play with few options and no gentlemanly status. After he is abused and battered by the other knights, Pistol grumbles, “To England / Will I steal, and there I’ll steal. / And patches will I get unto these cudged scars / And swear I got them in the Gallia wars” (5.1.78–80). This is a soldier who did indeed participate in the battle at Agincourt, but his actions are continually presented as cowardly and dishonest. Pistol will return to England with counterfeit wounds that he will use to extract money from gullible victims. Shakespeare creates a striking irony: even the soldier who went to battle is rendered an imposter, an embarrassment with no place in the final images of national unity and masculine triumph.

The disgrace is magnified by an earlier exchange between the knight Fluellen and Gower, after Pistol tries to intervene in the execution of his friend Bardolph. Gower recognises Pistol: “Why, this is an arrant counter-

feit rascal. I / remember him now, a bawd, a cutpurse" (3.6.58–59).<sup>2</sup> As suspicions swirl around Pistol, Gower imagines that Pistol's schemes will continue when they return from combat. Already, this veteran is treated as a counterfeit: "Why, 'tis a gull, a fool, a rogue that now and then goes to the wars, to grace himself at his return into London under the form of a soldier" (3.6.63–65). Pistol only comes to France, it seems, so that he can falsely claim he joined the battle. All of the details – places, commanders' names, and the like – these criminals recite "perfectly in the phrase of war, which they trick up with new-tuned oaths" (3.6.70–71). So, Pistol is branded an imposter before he makes the decision to become an imposter. He may be a veteran of Agincourt, but this character is also not a veteran of Agincourt. Pistol is ultimately one of the 'slanders of the age' to be eradicated from the vision of nationhood as a counterfeit. If his presentation is sympathetic, it is also damning.

Shakespeare thus captures in Pistol a dynamic of the period in which the soldier is at once celebrated for the construction of English nationhood while simultaneously erased for his potential aberrancy. Indeed, Barnabe Rich speaks to the same experience, although he does so from the perspective of an actual veteran who served in overseas campaigns before launching a career as a pamphleteer. In *A Souldiers Wish to Britons Welfare* (1604), Rich presents a dialogue between two captains, and the question arises of how to define a model soldier. One interlocutor announces, "For what is the effect of a Souldiers life? to undertake the defence of Religion, to fight for his Prince, to withstand the hazards of his Countrey, to repulse those that would depresse the same to protect his friende and family" (51). This vision is offered as an unrealistic ideal, and when the two captains turn to real world experience, they admit such soldiers are not readily available. The captain continues, "after the warres ended, when they returne into their Countrey, it is their owne choyce, whether they will begge or steale: if he cannot procure to be one of the *Knights of Winsor*, he may easily compasse to be whipt about the streetes at *Westminster*" (53). Reality cuts against the fantasy. If the veteran does not secure a place among the nobility, poverty and abuse seem the only choices. The dynamic here echoes that of Pistol: when he fails to join Henry's "band of brothers," he is forced into the role of a beggar. According to Rich's speakers, the fact that returning soldiers are no longer honoured is a sign of the corrupt modern days (73). The lowly status of the former soldier is a modern problem, then, and when this same captain

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "arrant counterfeit rascall" appears in the Folio text and is noted by the editors of the *Norton Shakespeare*.

characterises the fallen state of his contemporary world, he invokes the language of disability. The world “goes on crouches [...] it is waxen olde, decrepit and lame: A limping world God knows” (56). The implication is that the disabled veteran, the one not fitting into the nostalgic views of the history play or national identity, also figures the corruption of the times. In defending a soldier, that is, Rich’s text still excludes those who are aberrations. As with Richard, this veteran may be both pitied and seen as a symbol of the fallen modern day.

I am suggesting, finally, that Wolfert reveals the cultural operations of early modern culture as much as Shakespeare reveals to him the experiences of the veteran. Wolfert’s appropriations show that plays like *Richard III* or *Henry V* paradoxically depend upon the shameful memories of war experience to imagine the ‘normalised’ social body. But where does that leave the veteran? Wolfert writes:

Twenty years of asking, what the hell is wrong with me, going to these plays by Shakespeare, working with classical actor training, and the human sciences. After all of that I’ve come up with a theory of what the hell is wrong with me and in fact the human sciences have helped me transform that into, ‘what happened to me.’ (13)

We can hear in that recognition a move to a social understanding of disability, of Wolfert’s Post-Traumatic Stress. To a degree – what is wrong with Richard III is what happened to us. When Wolfert claims the embarrassment of nightmares, he also admits the ways disability is read by others. Embarrassment and shame arise from the imagined response of the audience, an audience who often watched Wolfert on stage. That moment of vulnerable shame, as Sedgwick and Ahmed imply, is also a moment of collective recognition. Shame, after all, is relational, dependent on all parties in the affective exchange. Overcoming that exclusion also involves the communal participation, beginning in a theatrical performance that lays bare the paradox of the real veteran who is imagined as the imposter.

### 3 Henry Lincoln Johnson and the American Coriolanus

Another category lingers in Wolfert’s performance that disrupts the imagined national body; I now wish to turn to race, and Chris Bell’s case against “White Disability Studies.” “I think it is essential,” Bell argues, “to illuminate the fragile relationship between disability, race and ethnicity in extant Disability Studies” (278). The most apparent Black veteran,



Othello, is curiously absent from *Cry Havoc!*, but Black experiences need not be limited to Shakespeare's 'race plays'. Indeed, race permeates all the plays, as has been convincingly shown in the work of Arthur L. Little and David Sterling Brown. Wolfert invokes race directly when he tells the story of Henry Lincoln Johnson and brings racial analysis to war plays that we too often assume do not speak to race.

Henry Lincoln Johnson was a 19-year-old African American who served in World War I. Although he joined with the 369 Infantry Brigade from Harlem, the American forces were still segregated at the time, which forced Johnson to fight alongside French troops. Before war begins, Johnson is already excluded from one conception of the collective. Wolfert tells the story of one of Johnson's first nights in combat, when on a nightly guard duty, he and fellow soldier Needham Roberts were attacked by twenty-five German soldiers. Johnson, seeing Roberts injured, fired his rifle, used its butt as a club, reached for his 18-and-a-half-inch Bolo knife, disembowelled the enemy, saved Roberts, and left the twenty-five enemy soldiers devastated. In the melee, he was hit 23 times – only to be treated in a French hospital because he is still excluded from American facilities. Johnson was the first American to win the French Cross of War but died in America at 33, an alcoholic with a metal plate embedded in his foot, estranged from his family, and suffering Post-Traumatic Stress (King).

In this war story, Wolfert discovers "The American Coriolanus." Like the ancient Roman general, Johnson wins horrifying renown on the battlefield by flying into a berserker fury, yet he brings home physical disability and a critical inability to get along. Wolfert quotes Cominius from Shakespeare's play: "I cannot speak him home: his sword, death's stamp, / Where it did mark, it took" (25). Casting Coriolanus as a Black man – as did the 2018 production starring André Sills at the Stratford Festival – offers the potential to reimagine Roman and English pasts, to challenge the seeming white default of history. Henry Lincoln Johnson is a violent soldier celebrated for his violence. When Cominius says "I cannot speak him home" in the original tragedy, he means that Coriolanus' deeds cannot be properly praised. Cominius cannot speak at home those things done abroad. Johnson, though, will never be able to return; his deeds cannot be reported in or to a home that does not exist. Calling him "The American Coriolanus," then, draws out the intertwined afterlives of race, trauma, and disability.

I do not wish to collapse those categories into one another, as if race necessarily means trauma or disability. As Josh Lukin writes, "from the

beginnings of the United States, the claim that ‘Blackness is like disability’ was not used as an expression of how black Americans suffered but as a tool of their oppression” (311). This difficulty is especially pronounced in the long history of African American veterans. As Lukin explains,

black soldiers [...] with war-derived physical and mental disabilities were often denied discharge, and sometimes subjected to beatings and torture in the guise of ‘therapy.’ But the pressure to convey the public message that ‘The Negro is just like you,’ with ‘you’ being an imagined able-bodied, empowered, white audience who could aid in the liberation struggle, led to strange silences and distortions on the subject of the disabled black veterans. (312)

To insist on sameness demands that the Black subject conform, and moreover, conform to an already established history. To recognise that impulse – and to resist it – again revises Coriolanus. To name an American Coriolanus invokes race; in turn, it transforms the object of Coriolanus’ fury and the effects of his banishment.

The implications for a collective national body become clear in a central scene of *Cry Havoc!*. Wolfert imagines Johnson at a Fourth of July picnic, the fireworks popping in the distance in celebration of a national ideal. Here Wolfert uses another sound effect, “chh-puh-hah” – each one interrupting a conversation and prodding Johnson. He stages an exchange between a partygoer and an increasingly-agitated Johnson: “Hey where you been, man? Ahh, France actually. Chh-puh-ah. Oh yah? What were you doing there? Well-ah-there was a war on, actually. Chh-puh-hah” (33). The awkwardness culminates when Johnson is asked if he killed anyone in the name of American freedom. Johnson’s imagined response is elegantly direct: “Fuck off, alright?” (33). The friend: “Oh real nice. Come to my party and talk like that? [...] Why can’t you just come back, talk nice, fit in, and speak pleasantly?” (33). The contradictions once again appear. Johnson is invited into the conversation by an apparent patriot who ties the violence of war to American freedom and the holiday. On the one hand, the veteran symbolises the national collective being celebrated at that moment. On the other, that same veteran is excluded from normalcy with a few thoughtless questions.

The play then returns to passages from Shakespeare. Johnson’s answer to “why can’t you fit in” transitions to a collage of recognisable lines in which Coriolanus insults the Roman public:

You common cry of curs! Whose breath I hate  
 As reek o'the rotten fens, whose loves I prize  
 As the dead carcasses of unburied men  
 That do corrupt my air, I banish you!  
 [...]  
 For you, the city, thus I turn my back:  
 There is a world elsewhere. (34)

Traditionally, Coriolanus' insults and banishment are the moments of pitiful tragedy, when his anger and arrogance destroy his political future. When the lines are spoken by Johnson, Coriolanus' insults operate as self-preservation, a screaming protest to the idea that his trauma must be suppressed so that he can "fit in" and "speak pleasantly" as part of the longer American history. That history cannot acknowledge the original acts of racial segregation that would have prevented Johnson from "fitting in." Coriolanus' lines now signal trauma and a refusal to accept the pleasantries of an American holiday in which racial histories are simply ignored.

In this dialogue, Wolfert develops the dynamic of celebration and revulsion that courses through Shakespeare's play, as when the war-hero appears before the Roman patricians to be nominated consul. The veteran appears noticeably anxious as Cominius begins to recount the war hero's deeds. Another senator remarks: "Sit, Coriolanus. Never shame to hear / What you have nobly done" (2.2.63–64). As a figure of the Roman public, this senator attaches martial and patriotic value to the violent actions; these are actions "nobly done." Yet embarrassment still forces Coriolanus to flee as he insists, "I had rather have my wounds to heal again / Than hear say how I got them" (2.2.65–66). His imagery converts the recollection of battlefield injuries into another physical injury, as his wounds would literally bleed again with the intrusion of memory. As Cominius tells of the bloody undertakings, the hero hides, unable to "hear [his] nothings monstered" (2.2.73). Such narratives of violence also imply that the veteran himself is monstrous. In celebrating Coriolanus, then, the public also paradoxically shames and excludes him. Wolfert's picnic scene may lack the tragic stakes of the Roman capitol, but we see the moment replayed: the veteran is nominally celebrated while also being ostracised. If his military actions are tied to the fireworks of Fourth of July celebrations, so are they tied to the trauma that turns to disability and monstrosity, just as they were when Wolfert watched Richard III make his entrance.

Wolfert concludes the story of Johnson with a quote from another of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Titus Andronicus*. He borrows the lines Titus

speaks upon returning from battle among the Goths, when he must bury his sons lost in battle. Wolfert, though, changes the lines to name Henry:

In peace and honour rest you here Henry.  
Secure from worldly chances and mishaps.  
Here lurks no treason. Here no envy swells.  
Here grow no damned drugs. Here are no storms,  
No noise, but silence and eternal sleep:  
In peace and honour rest you here, Henry. (36)

The lines make for a fitting tribute, as Johnson is granted the “peace and honour” unavailable during his lifetime. Another tragic irony surfaces, though. Titus speaks these lines to his deceased sons at the beginning of Act 1, and shortly afterwards slays his own child, Mutius. The father, in a sense, mourns children he also kills. For Johnson, it is a devastating eulogy, for he is a product of American military action honoured by a public body that also excluded and oppressed the veteran in life. Quoting *Titus Andronicus* is all the more relevant given the treatment of race in the play. The tragedy features Aaron, a Black character, who is used to distinguish between Rome and its barbarian enemies. Johnson is aligned with a Roman in Wolfert’s imagination, but in real life Johnson could neither serve with nor recover alongside the nation he served. He was treated as barbarian, and his trauma only seems to justify the treatment years later. As Carlos Clarke Draven notes, the history of Black veterans often turns on the exclusion of these soldiers from benefits, beginning in the Civil War. Titus’s children are honoured even as they are being killed. Coriolanus too is honoured by the Roman public yet made to suffer in shame as the ceremony continues. Those scenes play out in Wolfert’s imagination of Johnson, who is celebrated with a French Cross yet condemned for not speaking pleasantly at the national celebration.

Wolfert discovers the paradoxes of the veteran in the early modern plays. The writing on veterans of the period shows similar erasures, in which wounded or otherwise disabled veterans are rendered frauds and so erased. By drawing on Shakespearean lines to voice his autobiography, Wolfert collapses the two eras and brings to the space of the theatre a shared experience of grief and embarrassment. In the final moments of *Cry Havoc!*, Wolfert intentionally names the date and venue of each performance, always asking, “Now what? Now what?” (40). Sarah Ahmed’s account of mutual emotion captures the movement of national sentiments, and she gives a fitting summation of such a performance: “emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural

practices” (9). That is, the power of affect operates among and through groups; in fact, Ahmed says it is these very exchanges that create groups themselves. Shame's role in this process is complicated and contradictory. She writes,

Shame binds us to others in how we are affected by our failure to ‘live up to’ those others, a failure that must be witnessed, as well as be seen as temporary, in order to allow us to re-enter the family or community. The relationship to others who witness my shame is anxious; shame both confirms and negates the love that sticks us together. (107)

In its isolation, then, shame is also a collective state. As Wolfert describes feelings of monstrosity and deformity, he also implicates the normative social group that defines what it means to speak pleasantly. He implicates the collective body of the audience, who in the course of a performance may slip between identification and alienation. This is the paradox of the veteran emergent in *Cry Havoc!* and the Shakespearean canon to which it alludes. While Shakespeare's plays can imagine a ‘band of brothers’ united in a past history of war, they also alienate the veterans who make up that band of brothers. To reiterate, “shame both confirms and negates the love that sticks us together.”

## References

- Ahmed, Sarah. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed., Edinburgh UP, 2014.
- Ali, Alisha N., et al. "A Theatre-Based Program for Traumatic Stress in Military Veterans." *Doing Performative Social Science*, edited by Kip Jones, Routledge, 2022, pp. 29–40.
- Bell, Chris. "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal." *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 275–282.
- Brown, David Sterling. *Shakespeare's White Others*. Cambridge UP, 2023.
- Cahill, Patricia A. *Unto the Breach: Martial Formation, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." *Yale French Studies*, vol. 79, 1991, pp. 181–192.
- Collins-Hughes, Laura. "Using Shakespeare to Ease the Trauma of War." *The New York Times*, 9 March 2017, www.nytimes.com. Accessed 31 July 2023.
- Drazen, Carlos Clarke Drazen. "Both Sides of the Two-Sided Coin: Rehabilitation of Disabled African American Soldiers." *Blackness and Disability*, edited by Christopher M. Bell, Michigan State UP, 2012, pp. 149–161.
- Harman, Thomas. *A Caveat for Commen Cursetors Vulgarely Called Vagabonds*. Wylliam Gryffith, 1567.
- Hobgood, Allison P., and David Houston Wood, editors. "Ethical Staring: Disabling the English Renaissance." *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*, Ohio State UP, 2013, pp. 1–23.
- King, Gilbert. "Remembering Henry Johnson, the Soldier Called 'Black Death.'" *Smithsonian Magazine*, 25 October 2011, smithsonian-mag.com. Accessed 31 July 2023.
- Kreigel, Leonard. "The Cripple in Literature." *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, edited by Alan Gartner and Tom Joe, Praeger, 1987, pp. 31–46.
- Little, Arthur L., editor. *White People in Shakespeare: Essays on Race, Culture and the Elite*. The Arden Shakespeare, 2023.
- Long, Zackariah C. "Toward an Early Modern Theory of Trauma: Conscience in *Richard III*." *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 49–72.

- Lukin, Josh. "Disability and Blackness." *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, Taylor and Francis, 2013, pp. 308–315.
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. U of Michigan P, 2014.
- Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. Columbia UP, 2007.
- Rich, Barnabe. *A Souldiers Wish to Britons Welfare*. 2nd ed., T. Creed, 1604.
- Row-Heyveld, Lindsey. *Dissembling Disability in Early Modern English Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Salamon, Linda Bradley. "Vagabond Veterans: The Roguish Company of Martin Guerre and Henry V." *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture*, edited by Craig Dionne and Steve Mentz, U of Michigan P, 2006, pp. 261–293.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke UP, 2004.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 2nd ed., W.W. Norton, 2008.
- Wolfert, Stephan. *Cry Havoc!* 2012. Personal manuscript of the author.
- Woodbidge, Linda. "The Neglected Soldier as Vagrant, Revenger, Tyrant Slayer in Early Modern England." *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective*, edited by A.L. Beier and Paul Ocobock, Ohio UP, 2008.