

My Kingdom for Some Crutches



Battle of Bosworth, as depicted by Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740–1812)

by Theodore Dalrymple

Sometimes a storm in a teacup tells us about the weather outside. This is the case with a recent row at London's Globe Theatre, where the artistic director, actress Michelle Terry, has cast herself in the role of Richard III. This move aroused criticism because disabled actors felt that the role should have gone to one of them. That a woman should play so masculine a role, or that the director should choose herself to play the role, drew no attention.

The burden of the actors' outrage was that Richard III was disabled and therefore ought to be played by a disabled actor.

But as Shakespeare portrays him, Richard III was *not* disabled. (And in reality, he was scoliotic, not kyphotic). Shakespeare portrays him as an accomplished seducer and a ferocious warrior. He did not cry, "Some crutches! Some crutches! My kingdom for some crutches!" at the scene of the battle of Bosworth Field. He cried for a horse that surely would have been useless to him had he been severely handicapped.

In any case, the demand that actors should play only those parts that are somehow consonant with what we now call their "lived experience" is self-evidently absurd. If taken seriously, Richard III would have to be played by a member of the Royal Family (Prince Andrew, perhaps?), for only such a person could know or imagine what it was like to be a royal person and covet the crown. Taken to its logical conclusion, or its *reductio ad absurdum*, the argument would mean that the only person an actor could play was him- or herself.

Of course, a happy medium exists, though we are increasingly unable to find it. We should not expect Ophelia to be played by a 90-year-old crone. We should add difficulties in the way of an audience's "willing suspension of disbelief," as Coleridge put it, by casting a tall man as short or a short man as tall.

The whole silly controversy reveals to what absurdities we have sunk, thanks to identity politics and a willful misunderstanding, for the sake of personal or group advantage, of what wrongful discrimination is. Storms in teacups can be revealing.

First published in [*City Journal*](#).