

**Clare Stainthorp, “Activity and Passivity: Class and Gender in the Case of the Artificial Hand.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 45.1 (2017): 1-16.**

Clare Stainthorp’s article makes evident that Henry Robert Heather Bigg’s *Artificial Limbs and the Amputations which Afford the Most Appropriate Stumps in Civil and Military Surgery* (1885) is a must read for those of us studying Victorian disability, hands, or material culture. Her analysis of a woman’s prosthetic hand as described by Bigg—the surgeon who created it—reveals how the medical community’s views on the function of prosthetics were shaped by, as well as actively shaping, societal perceptions of gender, class, and physical norms, especially for upper-class women of marriageable age. While the article focuses on one specific case of prosthesis, it does so to argue that studies on disability in the nineteenth century need to account for and analyze “the distinctive voice of nineteenth-century medical professionals” to fully account for predominant views on normativity and wholeness, and further how those views extend to questions of class and gender (14).

Bigg’s *Artificial Limbs* gives an account of the “daughter of a distinguished nobleman, [who] had through congenital malformation a hand which was minus all its fingers and a great part of its palm” for which he created a prosthesis of felt and human bones that “had the exact feel of . . . the natural hand”. “The result”, Bigg claimed, “was perfectly successful” (qtd. in 1). But successful for whom and in what way? This is the question with which Stainthorp begins her article. Rather than focus on the experience of the young woman who received the artificial hand, Bigg focuses on the genius of his construction and how effectively the resulting prosthetic fooled those who looked upon or came into direct contact with it. The hand’s utility seems to be entirely social: its design is purely for others’ comfort as it “deceives touch but cannot feel” and thus ensures that the young woman is able to “maintain an illusion of wholeness” so she can remain competitive on the marriage market (10, 9).

Situated at the border of studies on artificial limbs by Vanessa Warne (2008) and Sue Zemka (2015) and studies on Victorian hands and identity by Peter Capuano (2015) and Pamela K. Gilbert (2014), Stainthorp argues that this woman’s artificial hand “disrupts . . . sensory experience and, consequently, undermines the agency associated with personhood” – the unnamed young woman is rendered a passive object in Bigg’s focus on how the world will touch her necessarily gloved hands (10). Stainthorp asserts that by maintaining “this woman’s anonymity [Biggs] provides an insight into perceived social prejudices about physical disability, the procreative role of women, and the importance of the marriage market when assessing female value” (8). Only a few people in Bigg’s study remain anonymous, and all have a disability that could function as an “impedimen[t] to gaining their desired place in society” (6). The article notes that Bigg’s description provides “no indication of how it felt to be the congenitally-disabled daughter of a nobleman who required increasingly elaborate prostheses to pass” as whole. Nor does it give any information about whose bones Bigg used to create the prosthetic: “Both women are cast as props with which Bigg demonstrates his considerable professional skill” (2, 5).

The final and, perhaps, least developed section of the article explores Bigg’s decision to replace the bones with which he initially constructed the artificial hand with ivory so that the woman need not feel as though she was wearing a “hand of death”

(qtd. in 1). His disavowal of this phrase, Stainthorp suggests, can be read productively in light of Victorian fiction, which vested dead hands with symbolic agency. She identifies gender as a gap in Katherine Rowe's study of dead hands in fiction (1999) and argues that Bigg's determined avoidance of an association between the young woman's prosthetic with the agency of the literary "hand of death" is yet another way that she is rendered passive. Ultimately, the active way that Bigg talks about himself and his prosthetic reduces the woman to a passive object of the marriage market and her family whose future hopes are saved by the active and "successful" artificial hand.

While Stainthorp's article does not engage directly with the questions surrounding amputation and race relations raised by Aviva Briefel's recent book (2015), it does introduce a new perspective by insisting that studies of nineteenth-century disability, prosthetics, and hands more generally account for medical views of prosthetic appendages, and how those views may have shaped societal perceptions of non-normative bodies. This article begins an important conversation that begs further exploration into the sexual and racial politics of touch and what discourses on artificial hands may help reveal about them.

Kimberly Cox  
Chadron State College