Disability in Class and Classics: Towards a More Nuanced Understanding of Ancient History*

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In the early 1990s the topic of disability in the ancient Greco-Roman world began to arouse the attention of the international academic community spurred, in large part, by the disability rights movement. Recognizing a vast, but relatively un(der)explored corpus of evidence, scholars have since sought to integrate the disabled body back into our understanding of ancient society and culture. Such research has demonstrated the enormous potential of this topic to broaden our understanding of the lives and experiences of the ancients. Despite this, however, disability seldom features in the curriculum of today’s Classics classroom.

As an undergraduate student in the 1990s, the topic of disability featured nowhere in my Classics curriculum; while this was understandable given the lack of scholarship at the time, the situation remains much the same today, despite recent work in the field. This is particularly troubling given the increase in the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education.1 Recent attempts to promote diversity in classrooms and curricula have resulted in an emphasis on issues of race, gender and sexuality, but an awareness of the history of disability remains largely neglected. My teaching, informed by my own research on deformity and disability, has sought to change this. By introducing students to the connection between ancient history and disability, we can provide them with new perspectives on issues that still resonate deeply today.

Before arriving in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM), I taught courses on Roman art and history in the Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU). In those courses, I often included sessions on “the disabled” under the broader umbrella theme of “Others” (which also included separate discussions about other marginalized peoples, including women, slaves and foreigners). The topic proved extremely worthwhile; students regularly commented that they had never considered the ancient world from the perspective of its disabled, but enjoyed the new material. It was this consistently positive response and indeed, enthusiasm, from my students that led to my desire to create a course devoted exclusively to disability in antiquity. Such a course would never come to fruition at WLU; it was the Department of Historical Studies at UTM that gave me

* Sincere thanks to the Editorial Board of Prandium, especially Duncan Hill, for their insightful comments towards publication.

1 The number of disabled students in higher education has increased substantially over the past decade, with 5% of university students nation-wide in the UK, 6% in Canada, and 9% in the US being disabled. See O. Konur, “Teaching Disabled Students in Higher Education,” Teaching in Higher Education 11.3 (2006): 351-363.
this exciting opportunity: in the fall of 2012 I was able to develop and deliver CLA390 “The Body, Physical Difference and Disability in Ancient Greece”.

This course introduced students to the ancient Greek material on physical disability, combining disability studies perspectives alongside traditional historical analysis. Our aim was to explore ‘self’ and ‘other’ dynamics in the construction of dis/ability in order to challenge traditional interpretations about the place of people with physical disabilities in ancient Greece, and, in so doing, to reflect upon modern assumptions about, and attitudes toward, people with physical disabilities. As a class we examined a wide variety of primary sources on disability – archaeological, medical, historiographical, literary, and visual – and evaluated the reliability of these sources and the context(s) in which they were intended to be read and/or viewed.

Through a series of case studies – hearing impairment, mobility impairment, speech impairment and visual impairment – students investigated the complex range of issues faced by those living with a disability in ancient Greece: How did the ancient Greeks understand and explain the causes and consequences of disability (medically, socially and religiously)? What accommodations, if any, were made for people with disabilities? How were people with disabilities treated within their community? How do modern ideas about disability differ from the past and can we judge an ancient society by our own norms?

In offering this course, my hope was to encourage students to think critically about what it has meant to be physically challenged and impaired throughout history. As such, the course was opened to students in the Disability Studies stream of Equity Studies at the St. George campus to allow students to take full advantage of its cross-disciplinary appeal and promote a shared, collaborative learning experience. This was, I think, wonderfully successful: a student from Equity Studies provided her peers with a framework for understanding current theory in disability studies, such as the ‘overcoming’ narrative, or the story of the ‘super cripple’ (both of which originate in the ancient Greek world). In the same way, her peers in Classics were able to contextualize related views in Greek mythology, most notably the Hephaestus myth. The small, seminar-style forum of this class fostered engaging and reflective discussion and encouraged the sharing not only of factual information, but also of personal experience(s).

One student in the course provided a particularly candid perspective on the subject, offering himself as a class case-study: the student experienced a mild stutter during oral presentations and coincidentally he was randomly placed in the group case study on speech impairments. The topic could have been rather uncomfortable or embarrassing for the student, and presenting all the more nerve-wracking because of his own condition; however, discussion with the student revealed that he had been helped immensely by the reassurance of his peers; the inclusive and comfortable learning environment helped “to steady his nerves.” His resulting presentation on the effects of speech impairment on rhetoric and public speaking in the ancient Greek world argued against the traditional interpretation that a speech impediment was universally met with

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2 See the contribution by Sara Deris in this volume “Examining the Hephaestus Myth Through a Disability Studies Perspective.”
3 Hephaestus was the only disabled Olympian god, described by various ancient sources as ‘crook-footed’ and ‘with feet turned backwards’ (Hom. Il. 18.371 and 1.607). Scholars have argued that the stories associated with Hephaestus are among the earliest writings in the Western tradition relating to disability. See esp. W. Ebenstein, “Toward an Archetypal Psychology of Disability based on the Hephaestus Myth,” Disability Studies Quarterly 26.4 (2006): 1-12.
scorn. Rather, individuals with speech impediments could be successful public speakers, demonstrating that a number of individuals (e.g. Demosthenes) took steps to mitigate their impairments and became popular orators, lauded by the public. Indeed, his research into disability in ancient Greece further bolstered the student’s confidence as he realized that what one said mattered as much as how one said it!

Teaching this course reaffirmed for me the three-fold value of studying disability in the ancient world: first, the topic has value in its own right as we learn how the ancient Greeks “made sense” of disability; second, in discovering how the Greeks made sense of disability, we uncover additional nuances of life in the Classical world more generally; and third, as evidenced by my student, disability (as a personal experience) offers a lens through which students are better able to engage with the discipline. Similar value can be found in examining disability in every historical period; as such, we must work towards exposing students to disability perspectives so as to address the wide range of issues that “disable” many people, the implications of which are important for all of us, whatever our ability.