Examining the Hephaestus Myth through a Disability Studies Perspective
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Examining the Hephaestus Myth through a Disability Studies Perspective

Sara Deris

Upon examining disability in the ancient Greek world through a disability studies lens, it becomes clear that several themes current in the way society views disability now find their roots in the ancient Greek world. As well, modern disability studies offers a more nuanced understanding of some of the ideas the ancient Greeks may have had about disability. The varied versions of the Hephaestus myth are “among the earliest writings in the Western poetic tradition related to disability,”¹ so the myth is therefore a logical starting point when examining disability in the ancient Greek world and its connections to disability in the modern world. Disability studies concepts, such as *kalos kagathos* and the concept of the ‘norm’ may be discussed in relation to the myth. As well, several current ideas that society holds in regard to disability that originate in the ancient Greek world may be observed in the myth, such as the ‘overcoming’ narrative, or story of the ‘super cripple’, disability and representation in literature, the ‘Chatterley’ syndrome and the representation of sexuality in disabled characters, and finally finding humour in disability. This paper will examine these concepts and themes using the Hephaestus myth.

The Hephaestus Myth

The Hephaestus myth has many slightly differing versions. Most agree, however, that Hephaestus is the son of Hera, conceived individually in response to Zeus’ individual conception of the goddess Athena.² Hephaestus emerges ugly and ‘shriveled of foot,’ causing the enraged Hera to cast him from Olympus.³ He is the only scorned Olympian to ever return, brought back up to Olympus by Dionysus to release his mother Hera from the chair he (Hephaestus) had crafted to imprison her.⁴ Hephaestus appears in many ancient Greek texts, such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which his wife, Aphrodite, a beautiful Olympian goddess, is unfaithful to him with Ares, another beautiful Olympian. Hephaestus cleverly traps them in the act, crafting a magical net that ensnares them and allows the rest of the Olympians to look upon them and laugh.⁵

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² Hesiod, *Theogony* 924 (text version 1).
³ Homer, *Iliad* 18.136 and *Homer Hymn to Pythian Apollo* 310ff.
⁴ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.20.3.
⁵ Homer, *Odyssey* 8.266-369.
Kalos Kagathos
Although Hephaestus is eventually accepted by the Olympians, he is scorned time and time again for his looks. The Greek concept of Kalos Kagathos, or ‘beautiful and good’ may be observed in the Hephaestus myth. Hephaestus is bold enough to demand as his wife the most beautiful of the Olympians, Aphrodite. However, she is unfaithful to him and turns to Ares, another beautiful god. It is easy to use modern perceptions of disability to view this event and blame Hephaestus’ disability as the reason for her unfaithfulness, but the concept of Kalos Kagathos contends that Hephaestus is undesirable because he is ugly, not necessarily because he is disabled. The Greeks highly valued physical beauty and symmetry, leading to the derision of those who were not considered beautiful. Hephaestus’ limp is a disability associated with asymmetry and has primarily an aesthetic meaning. Martha Rose argues that in the ancient Greek world, there was a difference between deriding the less attractive and isolating disabled people:

I do not argue that the Greeks did not even notice disability or that there was a utopian continuum, with the perfectly able-bodied on one end and the totally disabled on the other, everyone else blending in a happy rainbow of varying ability. Indeed, the Greeks noticed disability, commented on it, and sometimes made fun of it in ways that would make us shudder. This does not mean that people in the ancient Greek world despised all disabled people as a class or even grouped disabled people in a class.

Although disabled people in the ancient Greek world may have been derided for their looks, it was not necessarily a direct result of a disability, nor were those with disabilities likely to have been lumped together in one category. It is more likely that there was a scale of disability, less prominent disabilities being more easily accepted into society that more disfiguring ones. Lennard Davis, as well, discusses the Greek preoccupation with beauty: “the ideology of assigning value to the body goes back to preindustrial times. Myths of beauty and ugliness have laid the foundations for normalcy.” Davis uses the Medusa myth as background, but the Hephaestus myth provides equal evidence for this ideology.

The ‘Norm’ vs. the ‘Ideal’
In the Hephaestus myth, it can be seen that although Hephaestus faces some barriers in Olympus, including his initial fall and return, and is mocked, he is not completely segregated. Using the modern concept of the ‘norm,’ this is hard to fathom. The Greeks did not have a set idea of normalcy as exists now in modern society. Instead of normal and abnormal (or, more appropriately in a disability context, ‘subnormal’) there existed the ideal and the grotesque. The ancient Greeks did not even have the

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ebenstein, 5.
11 Ovid, Metamorphoses 4.770. Medusa was a gorgon described as having the face of a hideous human female, with venomous snakes instead of hair. Her direct gaze turns onlookers into stone. She was beheaded by the hero Perseus and her head given to Athena to adorn her shield.
vocabulary to describe the normal and abnormal, as the language of normalcy only came into Western language over the period 1840-1860. In the ancient Greek world, the ideal body was expressed in sculptures of “mytho-poetic bodies”, linked to those of the gods. It was accepted that these bodies were godlike, and unattainable by any single human being. The painting Zeuxis Choosing as Models the Most Beautiful Girls of the Town of Crotona serves as evidence for the concept of the ideal. According to Pliny, Zeuxis lines up the most beautiful girls in Crotona and chooses from each of them a singular, perfect body part, all of which will be put together to create a sculpture of Aphrodite.

The central point here is that in a culture with an ideal form of the body, all members of the population are below the ideal. No one young lady of Crotona can be the ideal. By definition, one can never have an ideal body. There is in such societies no demand that populations have bodies that conform to the ideal.

This concept of the ideal meant that disabled people were not a distinct minority group, but rather were members of the non-ideal majority. To go with the ideal is the concept of the grotesque, but even this did not equate to disability. In contrast to the ideal, the grotesque “permeated culture...whereas the disabled body, a later concept, was formulated by a definition excluded from culture, society, the norm.” The ideology of ideal-grotesque would have likely been on a scale as well; ancient Greeks would have had some concept of a middle, but it would not have been particularly important unless an individual was visibly, spectacularly, disabled. So Hephaestus, with his minor, mainly aesthetic disability, is not shunned from society but rather a functioning part of it.

‘Overcoming’ narratives and Hephaestus as the ‘super cripple’
It is unclear exactly how Hephaestus acquires his disability; some versions have him being born with it, while some have it caused by his fall from Olympus. Either way, Hephaestus was ugly and ‘shriveled of foot.’ Desiring revenge, Hephaestus binds his mother to a golden throne, ironically disabling her in the much the same way he is. The Olympians are impressed with his trickery and accept him. This may be viewed as a positive spin on disability; Hephaestus is sharp of mind, tricks Hera and is accepted by the other Olympians. However, in order to be accepted, Hephaestus had to first prove himself, or overcome his disability. He must do so again when his wife, Aphrodite is unfaithful. This mirrors a common modern disability phenomenon - the idea that a disabled person must perform extraordinarily to ‘overcome’ his or her disability and come up to the level of ‘normal’ people. Martha Rose’s thoughts on Demosthenes, the stuttering orator, apply: “he represents to the modern world the model of overcoming a natural defect by discipline and determination, by ‘diligent perseverance’...the message that overcoming a

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15 Pliny, Naturalis Historia 37.15-941 (section on paintings).
19 Plato, Republic 378.
defect leads to dignity is plainly seen in various media.”\(^{20}\) So, even though Hephaestus is accepted among the Olympians, he had to overcome his defect and prove himself first. Leonard Kriegel, a literary critic and disability studies scholar, captures perfectly modern society’s unfortunate obsession with the ‘overcoming’ narrative:

And so I watch the lame god push his body through the heavens of Olympus, and my own cripple’s heart fills with envy of and admiration for this brother in the kingdom of the crippled, my shining example of the will to endure.\(^{21}\)

Kriegel, although attempting to paint the Hephaestus myth in a positive light, painfully defines the ‘overcoming’ narrative and even that of the ‘super cripple’ discussed below: Hephaestus is a long-suffering, enduring character whose extraordinary strength propels him beyond the realm of the tragic cripple and into that of the ‘normal.’

The ‘super cripple’ is another common disability narrative that is both contemporary and found in the Hephaestus myth: the disabled person that despite their shortcomings has superhuman powers in other respects, and, in Greek myth, access to magic. Hephaestus is very physically robust—he is described as having a muscular neck and arms, and a broad chest.\(^{22}\) He is the only god that works, and he creates objects that are unparalleled in quality. He is also a powerful magician, and the objects he creates to help him around his forge can mimic the behaviour of human beings.\(^{23}\) This narrative, of crippled ‘magician-gods,’ occurs in other myths as well: Norse gods Tyr and Odin have an amputated hand and one eye respectively. Although they are punished with disability, they are also blessed with powers that help to bring them into society.\(^{24}\) Hephaestus in particular is a very powerful magician-god, and his powers bring him more into Olympian society:

In the \textit{Iliad} he is found as cup-bearer, then as master of metals and magical objects, finally as the Lord of Fire. It would seem that one could synthesize his activities and role in the mastery of the bond. He intervenes to unchain or unfetter...he is not associated with power in the sociopolitical sense, but he is powerful.\(^{25}\)

Hephaestus’ many roles afforded to him as a powerful magician ensure that he is a part of society and reaffirm his position as Olympian ‘super cripple.’ This narrative may also be found in modern storytelling: the book series \textit{A Song of Ice and Fire} is one example. Bran, one of the main characters, is afflicted with paralysis as the result of being pushed from a tower. Later in the series, disabled Bran becomes a very powerful magician, having the ability to see the future in his dreams and commune with animals. He gains a following of people who assist with his immobility out of respect for a powerful

\(^{20}\) Rose, 63.
\(^{21}\) Ebenstein, 2.
\(^{22}\) Ebenstein, 8; Homer, \textit{Iliad} 18.136 and 20.37.
\(^{24}\) Stiker, 60.
\(^{25}\) Stiker, 60.
magician.\textsuperscript{26} Bran was pushed from a great height, was disabled as a result, and possesses knowledge of the occult, just like Hephaestus. He has no power in the sociopolitical sense, but he is a powerful character. This parallels, with the Hephaestus myth as Hephaestus too is a less socio-politically powerful character, but possesses great power nonetheless.

Disability and Representation in Literature

Leonard Kriegel outlines several types of ‘literary cripples’ that remain constant throughout modern literature. In particular, his narratives of the ‘demonic cripple’ and ‘realistic cripple’ closely parallel the Hephaestus myth. The ‘demonic cripple’, according to Kriegel, feels wronged in his or her disability and is driven to commit evil by his or her need for vengeance.\textsuperscript{27} Hephaestus is a vengeful god to say the least. When his mother Hera spurns him for having a mobility impairment, he ensures that her mobility is impaired by trapping her in a throne. When Aphrodite is unfaithful, he ensures she too is unable to move while she is ridiculed by the Olympians. Although these are not particularly admirable actions, Kriegel argues that an audience still sympathizes with the ‘demonic cripple’:

His anguish becomes what men can identify with...He refuses to accept what has been meted out to him without voicing his defiance, his determination, his resistance to acquiescence. In this, he is admirable, even as we recognize that his purpose is evil. He challenges the very principles of Nature by insisting that man must not accept what has been given.\textsuperscript{28}

The ‘demonic cripple’ is easy for an audience to understand. Disability as a melodramatic device is widely used, and its use reinforces three prejudices against disabled people: disability is a punishment, disabled people are always bitter about their ‘fate,’ and disabled people resent, and wish to destroy, able-bodied people.\textsuperscript{29}

The ‘demonic cripple’ parallels with the Hephaestus myth as well as with the narrative of ‘overcoming’ disability. Kriegel paints the ‘demonic cripple’ as very extreme, so it may be contended that Hephaestus is also the ‘realistic cripple.’ The ‘realistic cripple’s’ disability is just there, “like the clothes he wears or the food he eats. Society cannot view him as the object of its fear or the object of its charity.”\textsuperscript{30} The ‘realistic cripple’ is portrayed as the rest of humanity. This parallels with the myth of Hephaestus as well, as Hephaestus is accepted into Olympus and does not experience segregation from society as a result of his impairment.

Sexuality in Disabled Characters

Hephaestus wins the hand of Aphrodite as a result of his trickery, but she is ultimately unfaithful, seeking affection from Ares. The ‘Chatterley Syndrome’, a storyline in which a disabled, male character loses sexual potency (real or psychological) and forces his companion into the arms of a virile, able-

\textsuperscript{28} Kriegel, 35.
\textsuperscript{30} Longmore, 37.
bodied male character, finds roots in the Hephaestus myth. Although Hephaestus is sexually competent, his unattractive disability leads Aphrodite into the arms of Ares. These depictions result in the ‘problem’ remaining in the body of the disabled character: the infidelity is not Aphrodite’s fault, but rather it is Hephaestus’ fault for being ugly. This narrative occurs time and time again in modern storylines and serves to reinforce the individual model of disability by locating the ‘problem’ in the disabled character. The sympathy shifts from disabled husband to able-bodied wife. Although Hephaestus is the wronged party technically, it is his disability that drives his beautiful wife into another man’s arms.

Humour in Disability

The practice of deriding the disabled was well-established in the Greek world. There was no moral compass pointing away from the mockery of disability and disfigurement- the Greeks considered ugliness a fair target. In Cicero’s treatise on oratory, he states: “In deformity and bodily disfigurement, there is good material for making jokes.” In mocking the disabled, the Greeks were not necessarily malicious- they just considered disability a worthy topic for humour. This is evident in the Hephaestus myth. When Hephaestus catches Ares and Aphrodite, exposes and humiliates them but also humiliates himself for the sake of the joke. He points out his disability, and states that his ugliness is the reason for his wife’s unfaithful ways. Furthermore, by pointing out his disability as part of a trick, he gains the acceptance of the Olympians, who appreciate his cunning ways. In Book 1 of the Iliad, Hephaestus exploits his disability for humour, getting up and refilling everyone’s cups as they laugh at his ungainly walk, distracting from the fact that Zeus has just threatened to physically harm Hera. Robert Garland argues that the derision of the disabled likely caused the subject psychological harm and contributed to the further isolation of the disabled person from society. However, this is a case of modern perceptions of disability clouding the interpretation of historical material. As seen in the Hephaestus myth and in the Iliad, since mocking the disabled was not seen as malicious in and of itself, deriding disability may actually serve to bring the disabled person into society, as occurs with Hephaestus.

Conclusion

The Hephaestus myth illuminates the ancient Greek origins of many modern perceptions of disability. A modern disability studies perspective assists in the examination of disability in ancient Greece. The concepts of Kalos Kagathos and the norm indicate that the Greeks were not so concerned with actual disability as they were with physical appearance. They regarded disability and disfigurement as something worthy of casual humour. As well, several prominent modern literary narratives of disabled people, such as the narrative of overcoming and the ‘super cripple’, the ‘demonic cripple’ and

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32 Longmore, 73.
33 Battye, 4.
35 Garland, 76.
36 Ebenstein, 6.
37 Garland, 79.
38 Garland, 86.
‘realistic cripple’ in literature, and sexuality in disabled characters may be traced to ancient Greece. The Hephaestus myth serves as an ideal starting point for the examination of all of these topics. The myth is rich with disability imagery and leads to a more in-depth understanding of disability in ancient Greece, as the ancient Greeks understood it.

**Bibliography**


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