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Disabled Gods: A Critical Disability Studies Analysis
of Ancient Greek Myths

Haley R. Graham

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I. Abstract

For the most part, literary analysis has focused on schools of criticism such as Marxist, gender, and post-colonial criticism. However, critical disability studies recently has gained ground as a vital pillar of literary theory. As a literary field, disability studies examines how representations of disability and the norm have changed by analyzing texts. Disability studies also investigates examples of prejudice against disabled people and how disability directly interacts with narratives. Many ancient Greek myths present opportunities to explore how disability was once seen and understood. This paper examines the ways that Greek mythology's prevalence in Western narratives perpetuates a regressive view of disabled people. How ancient Greece categorized and defined disabled people differently than today's society is key to analyzing disabled Greek characters. Using a critical disability studies lens, I will look at the myths of Larunda, Tiresias, and Hephaestus. These three figures in mythology all have impairments, two by extraordinary circumstances and one by natural causes. In each of these myths, normalcy is defined and reinforced by brutal language and behaviors. These myths are the basis of harmful motifs in modern literature such as demonizing, "overcoming" disability, and sexual impotency. The myths also engage in narrative prosthesis by reducing characters to only their disability. Exploring how these portrayals of disability persist and continue to pervade our modern narrative surrounding disability in literature can teach us to check our unconscious biases, be critical of worshipping mythology as all-wise, and to be more mindful when writing disabled characters.

1. Western Obsession with Greek Mythos

American literature draws, often unconsciously, from ancient myths. At the very least, tropes and plotlines found in some of the earliest myths are borrowed and adapted from myths and put in modern stories. For example, the hero's journey has been around and used for as long as stories have been told, and is still seen today.¹ Greek mythology is often the most commonly known mythos among Americans. From Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series to the many modern adaptations of myths such as the story of Achilles and Patroclus and Circe, Americans have a fascination with Greek mythology nearly unrivaled. However, along with engaging storylines and fascinating characters, Greek mythos carries many regressive stereotypes that pervade literature today. Of the many terrible tropes lurking in Greek mythology, one of the most notable is its treatment of disabled people. Coupled with the US's long standing interest in Greek mythology and its often poor portrayals of disabled people, I wanted to dismantle, using critical disability studies, how the harmful archetypes of disabled people in Greek mythology infect modern writing.

2. Techniques of Critical Disability Studies Used

This paper will focus on applying critical disability studies in several key ways. As a whole, disability studies considers ways in which disability relates to political, aesthetic, ethical, and cultural contexts. For analysis in literature, disability studies focuses on representations and

¹ The hero's journey basic structure: a hero goes on an adventure, wins a victory in a crisis, and comes home changed and stronger.

descriptions of disability, how normalcy is defined within a work, ableism² in a work, and how narrative relates to disability.

The research conducted for this paper is in observation of the social model³ when exploring answers to the important disability studies questions asked of the ancient Greek myths to be examined, such as: how “normal” is defined, how disability is either worshipped or demonized, how a disabled mythic figure is or is not sexualized and its relation to their disability, and if narrative prosthesis occurs.⁴ This paper does not attempt to find a definitive conclusion to these questions, but rather to add to an already ongoing conversation.

3. Concepts of Disability in Ancient Greece

Before engaging in the discussion of disability studies in the chosen myths, it's critical to understand how disability was defined in ancient Greece as compared to today. It's almost easy to assume that disabled people were either always treated the same way as they are today, worse, or existed in a utopia where disabled people were treated even better than they are today. All three of these misleading conceptions of disability in antiquity are harmful to understanding the history of disabled people. In all instances, if we believe that disabled people were viewed the same way as today, better, or worse, we're effectively erasing the way that disabled people actually lived in ancient Greece, as well as the suffering that many disabled people experienced

² Prejudice against disabled people.

³ The Social Model distinguishes impairment, a physical limitation, and disability, social exclusion as a result of society's failed acceptance of the diverse range of bodies in the world.

⁴ Term for a narrative using disability as a plot device or grand metaphor, failing to develop complex perspectives about disability, and therefore simultaneously revolving around and erasing disability.

at the hands of history. As an abled person, it's especially important to pay attention to ways in which the experience of disabled people in antiquity was difficult in ways we wouldn't expect.

The first arena we must look at is how language defines people in hierarchies. This often unconscious process has been termed "othering" in linguistics. Othering is the way by which implicit dichotomies are defined in language by a binary of "us" and "them".⁵ In other words, what group is considered "normal" enough to not need a "marker"? Who is the default? In our modern perceptions, we can easily point to those which society has made default using language, e.g., *ethnic hair care* for products for African Americans, as opposed to simply *hair care*, where the assumed default user is white.

Markedness can also be clearly seen in the use person vs. disabled person. Today, we use this generally appropriate language to signify who is disabled by society and who isn't.⁶ Along with these terms come many connotations as well, much of which are situational.

The concept and language of disability in ancient Greece was much different than today. For ancient Greeks, normalcy was not so clearly defined in language. The Greek term ἀδύνατος [vīnōtos] can loosely be taken to mean "disabled" in ancient Greek, but even then, the meaning of how someone is disabled isn't the same as what we would consider it.⁷ Both Athens and

⁵ Nilsen, Fylkesnes, Mausethagen, "The linguistics in othering: Teacher educators' talk about *cultural diversity*".(2017). 40.

⁶ There is heavy debate on whether it is more respectful to use identity-first language (e.g. disabled person) vs. person-first language (e.g. person with a disability). This essay uses identity-first language, as many personal accounts from disabled people express preference for it, as it doesn't separate their disability from their identity as something negative that needs to be set off.

⁷ Penrose, Walter D. "The Discourse of Disability in Ancient Greece." *Classical World* 108, no. 4 (2015): 499-523. doi:10.1353/clw.2015.0068. 500.

Sparta viewed disabled people and the abilities of them in drastically opposite ways. Plutarch⁸ commented that the ἀδύνατος [vinōtos] should be excluded from military service and politics.⁹ Further, this specific term is socially constructed as it does not refer to the impairment of an individual, but instead refers to a category of people who cannot take place in the military or government due to a sickness or disability. However, individuals were praised for “overcoming” their impairments, a trope that will be explored further later on. Athenians, by contrast, provided a sort of welfare to disabled people who were free of liability to serve in the military, as opposed to forced out.¹⁰

However, the two cities are alike in their outstanding ableism. Both places regularly practiced infanticide. If a male baby was considered “illborn”, he would be left to die in a designated place outside the city.¹¹

While both Athens and Sparta deal heavily in this horrific abuse, Sparta produced a certain ideal that influenced the Greek myths yet to be discussed. In Spartan ableism, if a person must leave battle, or otherwise be exempt, they are considered a coward regardless of the injury or existing impairment.¹² Born from this is the motif of “triumphing” a disability: that a disabled soldier that fights just as hard as anyone else, without aid, is stronger for it.

Further, disabled people in ancient Greece may have been placed in the ἀδύνατος [vinōtos] category due to the Greek concept of *Kalos Kagathos*, or “beautiful and good”. This idea reinforces the belief that beauty is linked to goodness, and ugliness to badness. Looks and

⁸ Greek biographer and essayist.

⁹ Penrose, “The Discourse of Disability in Ancient Greece”, 506.

¹⁰ Penrose, “The Discourse of Disability in Ancient Greece”, 508.

¹¹ Penrose, “The Discourse of Disability in Ancient Greece”, 510.

¹² Penrose, “The Discourse of Disability in Ancient Greece”, 511.

symmetry were highly important ideals in ancient Greece that undoubtedly tied physical attractiveness to morality. Instead, it wouldn't be that a disabled person is oppressed due to their disability, but because of how non-aesthetically pleasing they are.¹³ However, while this may in some ways explain the attitudes many Greek myths take towards disabled people, it can't be separated from its influence in associating disability with ugliness, undesirableness, and sexual impotence in today's narratives.

4. The Three Stories to be Examined

This paper looks at critical disability studies as applied to three mythological characters: Larunda, Tiresias, and Hephaestus. Each have been chosen due to the importance of disability to both the characters' fates and narratives.

5. Larunda

Due to the lack of legends surrounding Larunda, she is not an officially recognized figure in Greek mythology. Her only mythos is found in Ovid's *Fasti*, in Roman mythology. However, due to the sharing and near synthesis of Greek and Roman mythology, it can be reasonably assumed that a myth of a lesser known naiad nymph from Roman mythology could be found in Greek Mythology, but isn't mentioned. Under this reasoning, Larunda will be analyzed with the recognized Greek myths using the names of Greek deities.

Larunda (Lara) is a daughter of the river god Almo. Her myth says that her father often told her to be quiet, and that she never did. As with most outstanding personality traits, this costs

¹³ Deris, Sara. "Examining the Hephaestus Myth through a Disability Studies Perspective." *Prandium - The Journal of Historical Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013). 12.

Larunda dearly. Learning that her sister Juturna is trying to hide from Zeus, as he seeks to force her into a union, Larunda warns her sister to run away. She also tells Hera of her husband's infidelity as an act of solidarity to married women. In his unjustified anger, Zeus rips out Larunda's tongue so that she can never speak again. Zeus then calls Hermes to take Larunda to the Underworld to become a nymph of the rivers of hell. On the way to the Underworld, Hermes rapes Larunda, although she tries to protest, she is unable due to her muteness. She later bears twins because of this: the Lares.¹⁴

6. Analysis of Larunda's Myth

The normalcy of Larunda's myth is rather clear. While short, it details that speaking too much is looked down upon, "...Almo, the river-god often said:/ 'Daughter, hold your tongue,' but she still did not."¹⁵ However, because of this, it is also inferred that speaking in general is considered normal and expected. It is also expected of women to be silent about adultery and violent men, seen in Zeus' reaction to his actions coming to light, "Jupiter was angered, and tearing that tongue from her mouth/ That she had used so immoderately..."¹⁶ It is also noted that Larunda's muteness is not the norm, as she is marked as trying to talk using "her mute lips" to stop Hermes.¹⁷

Disability is a punishment for Larunda. The narrative foreshadows that she will lose her ability to speak in some way, as we learn of her father's warning that she shouldn't talk out of

¹⁴ Ovid. *Ovid Fasti Book 2*. Translated by Matthew Robinson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 61-62.

¹⁵ Ovid, *Fasti*, book 2, 61-62.

¹⁶ Ovid, *Fasti*, book 2, 61-62.

¹⁷ Ovid, *Fasti*, book 2, 61-62.

turn. And so, it comes as no surprise that Larunda is subsequently punished by taking out her tongue. The reader is to understand from this story, aside from the heavily misogynistic “lesson”, that if a person doesn’t behave, they will face the “consequence” of being disabled. In saying this, it demonizes disability, in this case muteness, as something undesirable, bad, and something to avoid at all costs.

As with many women in mythology, Larunda faces misogyny and sexual violence. Because of Zeus’ adultery and Larunda’s honesty, she is punished with being a nymph of the underworld. At this point, because she is mute, Hermes knows that he can get away with raping her because she can’t yell for help. From this, we see that this myth dismisses sexual assault on disabled people.

Larunda’s myth sets up one of the most commonly seen tropes of disability in literature. Aside from her heroic actions for women, the entire story is about her becoming disabled as a form of punishment. The reader is introduced to a woman simply trying to help other women, and then she becomes mute, and that’s it. There is no further development, as the myth uses Zeus’ punishment as the narrative prosthesis, and does nothing to further complex perspectives about disability. Larunda, while made mute, could use sign language to speak, or other ways to communicate, but these paths are not explored. Her muteness is simply a metaphor that women should be quiet and that disability is a cruel fate. Larunda’s story, like many others in literature, echos the idea that disability is a penalty.

7. Tiresias

Tiresias, a blind prophet of Apollo, has many myths attached to him. However, true to Greek mythology, each story usually contradicts itself or gives multiple reasons for the events of the legend. For the purposes of this paper, I will only look at the main myths of how Tiresias became disabled.

Before becoming disabled, Tiresias was known only as a wise man. Due to his widespread prevalence, the myth of how Tiresias became disabled is varied. The most commonly accepted reasoning is that Tiresias settled a bet between Hera and Zeus, declaring Zeus the winner.¹⁸ Furious, Hera takes away Tiresias' sight, but Zeus gives him the power to see the future as compensation.¹⁹ A different story tells of how Tiresias accidentally saw Athena naked, and thus she blinds him as punishment. However, to make up for it she gives him the ability of augury.²⁰

8. Analysis of Tiresias' Myth

According to *The Metamorphoses*, Tiresias participates in a scene where normalcy is loosely defined. In this passage, we learn that Tiresias himself has a complicated relationship with a consistent "normal". Due to his being a woman for seven years, he has a unique experience with stasis. Aside from this, this section also says that Hera got more upset than she should at losing, which is in character, "Saturnia, they say, grieved more deeply than she should

¹⁸ In an earlier conflict, Tiresias had been "cursed" to live as a woman for seven years. Thus he could settle their bet: who enjoys sex more, men or women? Zeus bet women do, and Hera bet men. Tiresias says that women do, "Of ten parts a man enjoys only one."

¹⁹ Ovid, Frank Justus. Miller, and G. P. Goold. *Metamorphoses*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984. 53.

²⁰ The practice of interpreting omens from birds; in this case through birdsong.

and than the issue warranted.”²¹ Blindness is marked as other and wrong, in that “[Hera] condemned the arbitrator to perceptual blindness,” and that “in return for his loss of sight” Zeus gives Tiresias his prophetic powers.²² Here, we clearly see that blindness is not the norm, and that it is considered a slight against and disadvantage to Tiresias.

Because we understand his disability as something incorrect, we can also see how his disability is used as a punishment. While there is no narrative link as to why Hera chose his sight, it’s likely that she wanted to choose something that would make his life more difficult. This clearly demonizes Tiresias’ blindness, and gives the direct assertion that it is a mercy that Zeus gives him something to “make up” for his new condition.

Although the bet itself concerns sex, Tiresias himself isn’t extensively sexualized after he becomes disabled. However, before he’s blinded, the express purpose of his visit is to determine an answer that’s based on his own personal love life. While no violence or leering takes place, this should be of note when looking at the myth.

Giving a blueprint for future tropes, Tiresias is the classic archetype of the blind seer. These characters are metaphors for disability as destiny, as in, that it’s all for some greater purpose. This damaging narrative prosthesis reduces a blind character to only that: a blind character. In literature, being blind and being able to see the future are nearly synonymous. This is a clear depiction of the “super-cripple” narrative: a disabled character who has superhuman powers that are often linked to magic.²³

²¹ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 53.

²² Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 53.

²³ Sara Deris, “Examining the Hephaestus Myth”. (2013). 14.

9. Hephaestus

Hephaestus, aside from being the god of blacksmiths, the forges, technology, sculpture, stone masonry, fire, and metalworking, is easily the most well-known disabled character in Greek mythology. Blacksmith to the gods, he makes all their weapons and is revered among them for his prowess. His handiwork appears in many other myths as objects of impressive quality, strength, and durability.

Hephaestus's origin myth is one not easily agreed on. He is likely born from Hera on her own as revenge for Zeus having Athena without her, and in most other accounts Zeus is not credited as the father. As for how he became disabled, one account by Homer tells that Hephaestus was thrown from Olympus by Hera, his mother, because he was born with a clubfoot.²⁴ In a different account by Homer, his disability is brought on by Zeus, his father, hurling him from Olympus for defending Hera from his advances.²⁵ These two accounts drastically change the narrative of Hephaestus' myth, as in one story he is disabled from birth, and in the other he is disabled later in life. I will examine the banishment by Hera.

Once he is thrown from heaven, Hephaestus makes a golden throne for Hera in order to trap her for revenge. Once she is successfully trapped, Dionysus is called to bring Hephaestus back up to Olympus to release her. To do this, Dionysus gets him drunk. He eventually lets his mother go, and he is accepted back into Olympus' society.²⁶

²⁴ Homer. *The Illiad*. Chicago: Great Books Foundation, 1962. Book 1, 590.

²⁵ Homer. *The Illiad*. Chicago: Great Books Foundation, 1962. Book 1, 591.

²⁶ Hyginus. "HYGINUS, FABULAE 150 - 199." HYGINUS, FABULAE 150-199 - Theoi Classical Texts Library. <https://www.theoi.com/Text/HyginusFabulae4.html>.

Additionally, Hephaestus was originally married to Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty. This didn't last long though, as Aphrodite resented their relationship and had an affair with Ares, the god of war. While "divorce" isn't used, Hephaestus undoes their marriage by giving back her bridal price to her father.

10. Analysis of Hephaestus Myth

In the story of Hephaestus' exile from Olympus by Hera, we see normalcy reinforced through the actions and language of the myth. The basic plot of the myth itself others and tells the reader that Hephaestus is not the norm, as his own mother is ashamed of his disability and casts him out. The language that Hephaestus labels himself with is "being lame". This treatment of Hephaestus is not considered normal, however, as rather than accepting his banishment with honor, he says that his "soul would have taken much suffering" had he not been rescued by Thetis²⁷. Additionally, he hides away from both mortals and gods with Thetis and Eurynome for nine years, establishing that he felt like an outcast.²⁸

Considering the most widely adapted version of Hephaestus' disability is that he was born with it, he is not "punished" with his disability unlike the other characters examined. However, because he is born as revenge against Zeus, it can be reasoned that he is disabled as punishment to Hera, which is why she throws him from Olympus. This furthers the harmful implication that disabled people are burdens to abled people.

Similarly, Hephaestus must prove his worth to the Olympians in order to regain acceptance into Olympus. He does this by releasing Hera from a golden throne of his own

²⁷ The daughter of Nereus, who was the eldest son of Pontus (the sea) and Gaia (the Earth).

²⁸ Homer, *Iliad* 18, 136.

design, and the people of Olympus are impressed and let him stay. While this may seem like a positive view of disability, it in fact reflects the modern ideology that a disabled person must “overcome” their disability in order to be welcomed.²⁹ In other words, the disabled person must do double-time to “make up” for their disability.

Most notably, Hephaestus’ myth has an interesting connection with sexuality. Although he marries the goddess of beauty, Aphrodite seeks out relations with many other people, most notably Ares. This is an example of the “Chatterley Syndrome”, which is when a story has a disabled, male character that gradually loses his sexual potency, which pushes his partner to find gratification from someone able-bodied.³⁰ This puts the blame on Hephaestus, as it’s his disability that “forces” Aphrodite into the arms of another. From the narrative perspective, the sympathy shifts from Hephaestus to Aphrodite, even though Hephaestus is the one wronged.

Again, as with Tiresias, Hephaestus’s disability is a symbol, a narrative prosthesis for his myths to rest on. His disability is used to make him a pitied character, similar to Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*. It gives his character something to overcome and be “better” from, something that marks him as incomplete. Like many disabled characters seen today, Hephaestus’ disability defines his character, but isn’t a part of him. It’s used to make him unique, but fails to develop a complex point of view of Hephaestus as a person.

11. Conclusions

Upon analyzing these three myths, it’s clear that many of our modern connotations surrounding disabled characters take after them. Authors often rely on such stereotypical

²⁹ Sara Deris, “Examining the Hephaestus Myth”.13.

³⁰ Battye, Louis. *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*. G. Chapman. (1966). 3.

depictions of disabled people because they know the types of responses that they'll get. It could be inspiration from a disabled character who has "overcome" their disability, or pity and infantilization from a character whose whole life is now centered around their disability. Neither of these narratives embrace and uplift disabled people in real life. While they might trick the untrained reader into having some kind of positive spin to them, they are nothing more than weak attempts to plug in a token disabled character. Able-bodied writers must do better.

Disabled people have long suffered these shallow attempts at representation that only serve to portray them in a bad light. It's long overdue for able-bodied authors to write fully realized disabled characters. Because we are easily romanticized by the past, we must take heed when reading mythology. It's critical to take our existing prejudices into account and make sure that they're not reinforced when consuming old, mystical stories. After all, they were written by other humans with their own biases, that regardless of the time when written, can incorrectly validate and inform our own harmful biases, leading to bigotry that could pollute how we write disabled characters today.

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