



The Myth of Disability:

Interpreting Physical Impairment in Greco-Roman Mythology

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	2
<i>The Body and the Word</i>	4
<i>Misshapen by Misconception</i>	8
Minotaur.....	8
The Centaurs	10
Pan.....	11
Hephaestus	12
Livy: An Account of Roman Prejudice	13
Conclusions.....	15
<i>‘Maimed in his Sight, Maimed in his Legs’</i>	16
Thamyris	17
Demodocus on Hephaestus	18
The Greek Hero – Blinded.....	20
The One-Eyed Roman Warrior and the Barbaric Gods	21
The Good, the Bad and the Divine Emperor.....	22
Conclusions.....	24
<i>Conclusion: Against Ableism in the Classics</i>	25
<i>Bibliography</i>	27

Introduction

Discriminatory social practices and attitudes towards disability abound in contemporary society. Modern discussions of disability express ideas that a disabled person must make extraordinary contributions to society in order to be worthy,¹ often drawing on Classical sources – notably myth – as ‘historical precedents.’ Even more common, however, is the thought that no disabled people at all existed in antiquity. ‘When I explain my topic [disability in Classical myth] to a non-classicist,’ writes Annie Sharples, ‘it is not uncommon for them to respond with “I hadn’t thought about that, I assumed they just killed them all” — it’s always nice to have your topic validated.’²

It is true that Ancient Greece and Rome were not disability-friendly in the modern way, lacking such important accommodations as wheelchairs and rumps, the Braille script, hearing aids, etc. But in some ways the attitude towards the disabled was more positive than today. As the linguistic analysis in the first chapter shows, those who would today be segregated as ‘disabled’ were not seen as a distinct and special group, and neither Greek nor Latin possessed a term directly equivalent to ‘disability’. One was either able to do some things, or nothing at all. This is not to suggest that the Greeks or Romans did not notice disability, or that it had no consequences. Rather, that the consequences varied, depending on whether it was peacetime or wartime, on the individual situation, and on the general state of contemporary society. Knowing that modern Europe went from cheering on so-called ‘freak shows’ to a relatively inclusive attitude towards the disabled within the span of two hundred years, it would be too hasty to assume that the attitude to disability remained the same for thousands of years in the ancient Mediterranean. As the following chapters show, the notion of disability and the treatment of people living with it varied significantly throughout antiquity and between contemporary cultures.

The Greeks have preserved significantly more myths about blind singers, lame gods, half-humans, etc. than the Romans, and generally tended to provide more support – social and monetary – to the disabled. Roman myth, on the other hand, never produced an epic of the Homeric type that would explore the truths and anxieties of living with disability. On the contrary, the Romans tended to transform actual mythical heroes and gods into semi-historical characters (see Chapter 3), or to mythologise actual historical figures, most often emperors. Therefore, most works that deal with Roman myths of disability turn for their examples to Roman religion rather than pure myth (Chapter 2) or to what is now called ‘urban myth’, which accounts for the disbalance between Greek and Roman material treated here.

The following chapters, after a linguistic overview, explore two areas of Greco-Roman myth that are often seen as evidence of a sharply negative attitude towards disability in antiquity. Based on modern films like *300*, there is the idea that any physically unusual child would be killed at birth. Second, based on poor translation and interpretation of surviving texts, there is the misconception that visual impairment was thought of as a ‘fate worse than death’. It would be extreme to assume that no disabled infant was ever put to death, or that no blind person ever lacked support. But the lurid image of the Greeks hurling their babies from

¹ see, for example, Aitchison (2001), who writes on congenitally disabled children: “Which babies will, even with disabilities, grow to make major contributions to society... is anybody’s guess.”

² Sharples (2019)

clifftops is certainly an exaggeration. And neither was blindness always seen as either punishment or gift.

The aim of this work is to uncover from misreadings and assumptions that have bolstered modern attitudes to disability true meanings and attitudes to set against these skewed interpretations.

I. The Body and the Word

Our mental image of the bodies of Classical antiquity is shaped by the Renaissance vision of them as perfect. From buildings to sculptures, ancient Greek and, to a lesser degree, Roman artists strived to achieve a mathematical perfection of form. Their Renaissance disciples, as well as Neo-classicists later, took the surviving sculpture and paintings, depicting bodies that are primarily beautiful, as evidence of the Greco-Roman physical perfection and immortalised this image in their art. An eighteenth-century scholar of art history writes that ‘the most beautiful body of ours would perhaps be... inferior to the most beautiful Greek one’ and that, moreover, ‘those diseases which are destructive of beauty, were... unknown to the Greeks.’³ Even today, despite the recent discoveries in paleopathology and a body of literary evidence of a very different landscape of disability, we still persist in seeing the ancient world in its idealised form. Coetzee poignantly draws it out:

‘Hellas: half-naked men, their breasts gleaming with olive oil, sitting on the temple steps discoursing about the good and the true, while in the background lithe-limbed boys wrestle and a herd of goats contentedly grazes. Free minds in free bodies. More than an idealised picture: a dream, a delusion.’⁴

Rome’s extreme militarism, too, offers the tempting idea that its citizens would have developed a near-perfect physique. It is true that these militaristic tendencies disposed the Romans ‘to take grave exception to persons who did not fit into the uniform mould of the majority,’⁵ and that they tended to interpret any irregularity of nature as a sign of impending catastrophe.⁶ But the perfect body of a Roman soldier is the stuff of post-Renaissance imagination and subsequent fascist fantasy. The idea of the Romans’ physical perfection, fed by the reception of the classics in art and literature and by the recently-developed ‘science’ of eugenics, was central to Mussolini’s ‘religion’ of *Romanità* but most certainly far removed from reality.⁷

In fact, ancient Greece and Rome were inhabited by a significant number of people with visible physical disabilities. An excavation of a fifth-century burial site in Greece, for instance, revealed that over 40 percent of the individuals buried there had some bone pathology⁸, and the number of votive offerings, shaped to represent the ailing body parts, that are found in healing temples also shows that disease and disability were not unknown to the Greeks and Romans. In fact, quite contrary to Renaissance images such as Raphael’s *The School of Athens*, “in any given public gathering place, one would have seen a much greater variety of physical conditions than one would see in the developed world today,” as Martha Rose puts it.⁹ She further observes that this variety would have included not only the ‘lithe-limbed boys’ we see in sculpture but children affected with clubfoot, people with cerebral palsy, mutilated war veterans, and many other people with various forms of disability – many of which one would not see today. This is due not only to the different level of medical development in the ancient world, but also to a different social environment. Unlike in the modern era, even the most minor injury could result in a permanent disability in antiquity, and there was no equivalent to the NHS that would guarantee a visit from a doctor to an ill or injured person. And even if the

³ Winckelmann (1972/1755) 62, 63

⁴ Coetzee (2003) 132

⁵ Garland (1995) 58

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ see Gentile (1990) and Gentile (1997) 42

⁸ Henneberg and Henneberg (1998) 527

⁹ Rose (2003) 9

doctor did come, one's chances of recovery did not increase significantly since there was not a substantial body of accurate and effective medical knowledge to draw upon. In these circumstances, the potential that one could become disabled was a simple fact of life, and, like elsewhere in the ancient world, there was certainly a significant number of people living with a disability throughout the Greco-Roman landscape.

Evidence of this can also be found in the ancient Greek and Latin languages. Although there is no exact equivalent of the term "disabled" as we define it today, both languages possess an extensive list of terms that describe conditions of being lame, blind, missing a limb, suffering from a disease, etc. It is important to analyse this terminology as it is always, and in any language, highly revealing of social attitude.

Many of these terms were quite general. The Greek word *pêros* ("maimed") and its many variations denoted "any body that deviated significantly in outward appearance from the standard,"¹⁰ much like the Latin term *deformis*, which Lewis and Short define as "departing either physically or morally from the right shape, quality etc."¹¹ The huge breadth of both terms is apparent from the contexts in which they are found. The Greek *pêros* is used both by Homer to describe the blind Thamyras, whom the Muses "maimed" for his attempt to rival them,¹² and by Aristotle, whose *Generation of Animals* mentions the "deformity" of baldness.¹³ The Latin term, too, has a variety of meanings. Cicero frequently uses it as "ugly", although with a note of moral judgement,¹⁴ but links it to disability in his treatise on *Oratory*, in which he states that 'in deformity and bodily disfigurement there is good material for making jokes'.¹⁵ The breadth of this word – and a likely Greek influence on its meaning – is apparent from Suetonius' description of Domitian as having been "deformed by baldness" in his later years.¹⁶ Another pair of terms sometimes used to describe people with physical variations has a broad meaning fluctuating between "ugly" and "disgraceful" (*aischros* in Ancient Greek and *turpis* in Latin) – sometimes making it barely translatable. While it is clear that Homer's Thersites, with his limp, his bald head and misshapen shoulders, is described as "the ugliest man" in Agamemnon's army¹⁷, "what Plato had in mind specifically when he discusses a crude form of dance that imitates the movements of ugly people (*aischionôn*) is anyone's guess."¹⁸ The Latin *turpis* is somewhat different in use. Virgil uses it as an epithet of disease (*turpisque podagras, turpis scabies*) rather than a person,¹⁹ while Ovid tends to associate it with old age rather than disfigurement.²⁰ Horace, however, describes "a foul herd of men," either shameful with or disfigured by disease – or both, testifying to the Romans' common interpretation of disease as something inappropriate.²¹

Some better-defined terms include the Greek word *kolobos*, which, as Aristotle plainly states, "can only refer to an object or a body that is missing something, such as a vessel missing a handle or a person missing an irreplaceable extremity."²² Although we have no precise

¹⁰ *ibid.*: 12

¹¹ Lewis and Short (1879)

¹² *Il.* 2.599

¹³ *Generation of Animals* 784a; see Rose (2003) 12

¹⁴ *Cael.* 3.6, *Inv.* 1.24

¹⁵ *Or.* 239

¹⁶ *Dom.* 18

¹⁷ Homer *Iliad* 2.215-220

¹⁸ Rose (2003) 13, referring to *Laws* 7.814

¹⁹ *Georgic* 3.299, 3.441

²⁰ *Amores* 1

²¹ *C.* 1, 37.9-10

²² *Metaphysics* 5.27.3-4 1024; see Rose (2003) 13

definition for the term's closest Latin equivalent, *mutilus*, it is used to refer to soldiers who have cut off a toe to avoid military service²³ and of horned animals missing a horn.²⁴ Similarly, the meaning of 'lameness' (*chlobos* in Greek and *clauditas* in Latin) is restricted mainly to an abnormal gait.²⁵ However, even the better-defined, neutral terms always carry a cultural load. Although it is highly improbable that any author ever ventured to purposefully create an inoffensive vocabulary to describe the disabled, even the existing neutral terms were subject to what we now call the "euphemism treadmill", a process in which the overuse of a correct, polite term for a specific disability results in its turning into a dysphemism – i.e., a swear-word.²⁶ The Latin word *mutus* is a good example of this as its use parallels that of its English translation, "dumb". Originally onomatopoeic, imitating the 'mu' sound of animals incapable of speech, it gradually came to denote "someone who is either incapable of speech or stupid or a combination of both."²⁷ Similarly, *claudus* mentioned above acquired an offensive meaning, vaguely similar to that of "defective" or "untrustworthy",²⁸ – much like its English equivalent, "lame", has come to mean "pathetic" in the younger generation's vocabulary, to the point of rarely being used to refer to a specific gait.

The most revealing pair of terms denoting people with disabilities has also undergone this process. Both the Greek *teras* and the Latin *monstrum* are used in extant texts to describe physical (usually developmental) anomalies in both people and animals – but also referring to frightful mythological creatures. Homer describes the head of Gorgon Medusa as "the *teras* of Aegis-bearing Zeus"²⁹, clearly referring to her terrifying appearance and powers. But *teras* originates from a Proto-Indo-European root meaning "sorcery", and at first used to denote a marvel, or a divine sign – much like *monstrum*, which is etymologically related to *monere* ("to warn") and used to describe a divine sign or warning.³⁰ However, the original meanings of these words soon moved into the vocabulary for mythological monsters – which are indeed natural marvels – and then began to denote people with disabilities, gradually becoming terms of offence. Their use was not always intentionally offensive. Aristotle, although doubtlessly aware of the Homeric use of *teras*, felt that this was the most appropriate term for a scientific discussion of congenial disability in his *Generation of Animals*.³¹ Livy, too, readily uses the term *monstrum* to describe both 'a lamb with a pig's head' and 'a sixteen-year old of indeterminate sex', viewing both as natural anomalies signifying a disaster – but also as 'disgusting offspring'.³² In fact, extant texts in Latin use *monstrum* as a term of offence more frequently than in any other way: 'a monster of a man' (or woman) is a favourite offence of the comedians,³³ and Horace describes Cleopatra as a *fatale monstrum*,³⁴ – much like a modern English speaker would use 'monster' today.

But the choice of these particular words as offensive terms is not just a consequence of the 'euphemism treadmill'. The connection between monstrosity and morality is apparent in a great number of Greek myths, and in the many connections Roman historians draw between the

²³ Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 1.11; Cod. Th. 7.13.10

²⁴ Varro *De Lingua Latina* 9.26

²⁵ see Rose (2003) 13 for the Greek term; for the use of *clauditas*, see Cornelius' description of Agesilaus, who was 'lame in one foot' (*Agesilaus* 8.1) and Horace's *C.* 3, 2.32

²⁶ see O'Neill (2011) 282-284

²⁷ Garland (1995) 4

²⁸ see Livy 37.24 for the former and Ovid *Pont.* 3.1.86 for the latter use.

²⁹ *Il.* 5.741

³⁰ Garland (1995) 67

³¹ Garland (1995) 4

³² Livy 31.12.6-8

³³ Terence *Eunuchus* 4.4.29, Plautus *Poenulus* 1.2.64.

³⁴ *C.* 1, 37.21

births of disabled children and fatal events in Rome's history. But myths and historians' conjectures cannot be easily accepted as reflecting the real social practices and attitudes to people with disabilities. The following chapter analyses the various narratives of disability in ancient Greece and Rome, showing that even within one culture the disabled were never perceived in one single way, and that this way was not always and entirely negative.

II. Misshapen by Misconception

A society without a capacity to explain the birth of a disabled child in medical terms is likely to regard it as an example of the power of the gods to violate the rules of nature. Even though it was not unknown to ancient Greeks and Romans that a disabled child is often born from parents with a similar disability,³⁵ their understanding of heredity and genetics was still obviously very primitive. It was generally believed that the birth of a strong and healthy infant was dependent upon the goodwill of the gods, and therefore the birth of a disabled one testified to the gods' hostility. One of the easiest ways to explain such an occurrence was to point an accusatory finger – at the child, the parents, or the gods, or all at once. According to our modern popular culture myths about antiquity, the child in question was usually exposed by its parents. However, although exposure evidently *was* practised by some and is discussed in a number of texts in both Greek and Latin, our modern myths about the killing of disabled babies and the horrible treatment of congenitally disabled adults are certainly exaggerated. Most non-Classicists addressing this topic turn to the myth of Oedipus, conflating his lameness and his exposure and concluding that 'deformed' children were routinely killed. Even published works about the treatment of new-borns with visible physical variations offer surprisingly little in-depth analysis of the surviving historical evidence and primarily address mythological material.³⁶ So far, however, a very detailed account of the practice of exposure in Ancient Greece has been made by Martha L. Rose, and by Cynthia Patterson, who shows that the decision about rearing or not rearing a disabled baby was not based solely on physical appearance. Robert Garland also discusses exposure in both Greece and Rome, concluding that not all 'deformed' infants would be killed.³⁷

These accounts offer a socio-historical perspective on the matter. But the focus of this chapter is the basis of the modern myths about the treatment of the congenitally disabled in antiquity – that is, ancient myth and literature. In Greek mythology one encounters a variety of characters whose appearance at birth differs significantly from the average. The connection between 'monstrosity' and morality mentioned earlier is especially evident in the origin myths of half-human, half-animal 'monsters', whose looks are often ascribed to the 'sinfulness' of their conception and birth.

Minotaur

In the mythological imagination, a human-animal hybrid was often the product of a union between a mortal man or woman and an animal. The most famous of such myths is the story of Pasiphae, the wife of the Cretan king Minos, who desired a bull. Desperate to achieve a union with the subject of her passion, the queen sought help from the famous Athenian craftsman Daedalus, who constructed for her a life-like cow inside which she would hide and be taken out to pasture where the bull was grazing. Pasiphae's conquest was successful, and she gave birth to the Minotaur, commonly represented as having a human body and the head

³⁵ Rose (2003) 14

³⁶ for summaries of secondary literature, see Oldenziel (1987) 87-107 and Boswell (1988) 40-41

³⁷ Garland (1995) 72

of a bull,³⁸ who was hidden away in the depths of the labyrinth “like disturbing anatomical peculiarities in the real world”, as Garland puts it,³⁹ until his death at the hands of Theseus.

This story is widely known and has influenced a great number of artists and thinkers. The common interpretation of the myth is allegoric, like in Picasso’s series of drawings, in which the man-bull (or should one say bull-man?) is the artist’s alter-ego that incarnates wild masculinity.⁴⁰ But it was hardly the original purpose of the story to create a means of artistic self-expression. It is, of course, practically impossible to judge what the myth ‘originally’ meant, since the myth is not entirely Greek but Minoan in its origin. The religion of ancient Crete is significantly less documented than that of Greece, and Minoan mythology has mainly been passed down to us via its Greek and Roman interpretations, which were in disagreement already in antiquity. For instance, the mythical bull, Minotaur’s father, is associated with Poseidon by some authors⁴¹ and with Zeus by others,⁴² reflecting what is likely to be the original realm of the Minoan bull-deity (the sea) and his importance in the pantheon (equal to Zeus) respectively. This chapter is not going to analyse the way the Cretan original was recycled in the Greek imagination. Instead, it focuses on how the myth as we know it fits into the moral frame of Greek polytheism and how it is associated with disability.

‘Lacking the elaborate mechanisms of, say, the Christian Church for enforcing their will, both Greek and Roman polytheism were more modestly equipped to elicit submission and subservience from either the devout or the recalcitrant,’⁴³ writes Garland. Indeed, instead of producing a set of concrete rules and establishing firm criteria of sinfulness, the Greek and Roman religions developed mythological stories that, among other functions, served as stern warnings against amoral behaviour. As will be shown further in this chapter, there is an evident pattern to the origin myths of human-animal hybrids. First, the birth of such ‘monsters’ is influenced indirectly by the sins of their parents or even grandparents who have angered the gods in a way that is not related to marriage and conception. Second, the birth of a half-animal child is often represented as the consequence of adultery or perversion.

Both of these influences are clearly present in and form the core of the Minotaur myth. First, the gods are hostile to both his ‘parents’. Minos, competing for the throne with his brothers, had asked Poseidon for a sign to confirm his right to rule. The sea god sent him a snow-white bull that Minos would later have to sacrifice, thus ‘returning’ it to the god, but the king decided it was too fine to be killed and substituted it with another, provoking the god’s wrath.⁴⁴ As for Pasiphae, there is a tendency among the descendants of Helios, her father, to fall for ‘wrong’ males and commit acts of horrible sin because of them,⁴⁵ which in modern scholarship has sometimes been explained as Aphrodite’s revenge on the daughters of the god who betrayed her affair with Ares to her husband, Hephaestus.⁴⁶ Whether it was the wrath of Poseidon or

³⁸ This, however, is not the only representation. The word ‘Minotaur’ does not indicate his hybridity, meaning simply ‘the bull of Minos’, and sources from antiquity describe him simply as ‘part bull and part man’ (e.g. Ovid *Ars Amatoria* 2.24). Thus other, more centaur-like images of the Minotaur have appeared later in art history, particularly in the Renaissance, but also in modern art, such as Picasso’s Minotaur series mentioned earlier.

³⁹ Garland (1995) 61

⁴⁰ Gadon (2003) 21

⁴¹ Pseudo-Apollodorus *Bibliothèque* 3.1.3, Diodorus Siculus *Bibliotheca historica* 4.77.2

⁴² Statius *Thebaid* v.431

⁴³ Garland (1995) 59

⁴⁴ Pseudo-Apollodorus *Bibliothèque* 3.1.3; compare to compare Diodorus Siculus 4.77.2 and John Tzetzes, *Chiliades* i.479ff

⁴⁵ Compare to Medea, who was Pasiphae’s niece and killed her brother and later children out of mad passion for Jason; to Ariadne, Pasiphae’s daughter, who also killed her brother to save Theseus, an enemy; Phaedra, another of her daughters, who fell in love with her stepson.

⁴⁶ see pp. 18-20

Aphrodite, or both, it lead to Pasiphae's perverse adultery with the white bull, which on its own was considered enough to produce a monster.

The myth thus reflects two overlapping causes of 'monstrous' births. Warning against adultery and 'the commingling of worlds which properly should remain distinct'⁴⁷ is the common purpose of many other myths about the birth of half-human hybrids, some of which notably do not deal with bestiality.

The Centaurs

One of such myths considers the birth of centaurs. Generally depicted as creatures having the head, arms and torso of a human attached to the headless and neckless body of a horse, they are represented in Greek myth as wild, savage and uncivilised by their very nature. Their origin is surprisingly similar to that of the Minotaur, involving the rage of the gods, an affair, and possibly bestiality.

Like in the case of the Minotaur, however, it must be noted that the birth-myth emerged later than other stories about them and had a specific agenda that has little to do with the origin of the centaur in the mythological imagination of the Greeks. Some scholars have even suggested that the centaurs' possession of too many limbs for either a human or a horse is 'almost un-Greek',⁴⁸ and they are indeed not Greek but Indian in their origin and should be identified with the Indic *Gandharvas*, wild mountain goblins who can assume animal form.⁴⁹ It is more plausible, however, that the convergence of man and horse is due to a miscomprehension or misrepresentation of a mounted horse-rider first encountered by the Greeks, who had not yet learned to ride on horseback;⁵⁰ or that the centaurs were originally a wild and uncivilised but indeed human race. The Greeks believed they could turn into animals, and the half-horse images show them mid-transformation.⁵¹ This latter theory is supported by the fact that the earliest texts to mention centaurs, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the *Homeric Hymns*, do not seem to regard them as having a composite form at all.⁵² Therefore the negative narratives of the centaurs' birth could only have emerged significantly later, along with other similar stories this chapter describes, as warnings against sin and infidelity. Although it is impossible to date these origin myths precisely, their moral message is quite obviously that of the polis-based polytheism.

According to the version preserved by Tzetzes,⁵³ the centaurs' father was Ixion, a Thessalian king, who desired Hera. To hinder him from achieving this desire and to have an excuse to punish him, Zeus transformed Nephele, a cloud nymph, into a likeness of Hera. Nephele was then seduced by Ixion and gave birth to either centaurs themselves, or a boy, named Centaurus. In the Centaurus version, he later fathered the centaurs by mating with Thessalian mares. It is

⁴⁷ *ibid.*: 61.

⁴⁸ Fox (1964) 270-71.

⁴⁹ Dumézil (1929) 253-59.

⁵⁰ Nash (1984)

⁵¹ Lawson 1910: 251-52. Harrison (1908: 303) also supports the theory of human origin but states that the convergence with a horse was necessary to the artist to indicate the centaurs' shagginess and wildness, and there was no belief in the supernatural involved. This and the horse-rider theory are not entirely exclusive: the wild people believed to be able to turn into horses could very well be the horse-riding invaders from the uncivilised north (which would also explain the mythical centaurs' ferocity).

⁵² *Il.* I.267-268, *Od.* 21.295-305, *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 222-225. Moreover, just like in Minotaur's case, the name does not indicate their composite nature either: it is usually derived from κεντέω, to pierce or goad, and ταύρος, bull, therefore to be translated as 'a killer of bulls' or 'a bull-herd', or even 'cowboy'.

⁵³ *Chiliades* 9

clear what these two stories attempt to do. The latter (and later) one makes an attempt to find the most logical explanation of the dual nature of the centaurs by giving them a human and an animal parent, while also serving as a stern warning against bestiality. But the earlier version, although it seems less ‘logical’ today, would make as much sense to an ancient Greek, explaining the ‘monstrous birth’ through the sinful behaviour of the parents. Other tales of the centaurs’ birth follow a very similar pattern.⁵⁴ This type of story is repeated in other myths of human-animal hybrids as commentators attempt to create a warning against sin and adultery.

Pan

The most bizarre and moralistic story of this kind was told about the birth of Pan, the goat-legged shepherd god.

His parentage has always been unclear – Roscher finds eighteen various combinations of parents.⁵⁵ This is because, like in the case of the Minotaur, Pan’s cult emerged in a somewhat un-Greek culture. His principal place of worship was in Arcadia, in the Peloponnesian highlands – a region that was always distinct from the rest of Greece. Herodotus, although he does not go so far as to call them a different race, notes that the Arcadians are the ‘aboriginal’ people of Greece.⁵⁶ Their cult of Pan was unfamiliar to other Greeks, who made attempts at integrating him into the pantheon by association with similar deities like Hermes or Dionysus, consequently distorting what was probably the ‘original’ story.

One of the more informed commentators, Nonnus, states that Pan’s mother was one Penelope of Mantinea (a city in ancient Arcadia), who had him with Dionysus,⁵⁷ – a very slight distortion of what was probably the original myth of a human woman being impregnated by the harvest god to give birth to the patron of shepherds. This Penelope, however, easily got confused with the most famous Penelope of Greek myth – the wife of Odysseus. From this confusion emerged the ever-so-fitting myth of infidelity resulting in the birth of a monster. Herodotus and Apollodorus both tell the story of Penelope cheating on her husband with Hermes, giving birth to goat-legged Pan, and being subsequently banished to Arcadia, thus becoming ‘Penelope of Mantinea’.⁵⁸ Other ancient Greek sources, for obvious reasons accepted later by Christian commentators, record that Penelope had slept with all one hundred and eight suitors and gave birth to the beast-like Pan as a result.⁵⁹ Thus this story, too, attributes the birth of a bizarre-looking child to the anger of the gods with the sins of its parents.

But one must be careful not to immediately see this pattern, repeated in all the myths discussed, as a reflection of reality. Although the birth of a child whose appearance differs significantly from the average was likely to be seen as a manifestation of the ill-will of the gods, there is little evidence to suggest that the parents of such a child would be stigmatised as sinners or treated as social outcasts.⁶⁰ Although they would receive little support (moral or financial) from

⁵⁴ see Nash (1984) 273-274.

⁵⁵ Roscher (1909) 1379.

⁵⁶ Herodotus 8.73; other myths about Pan also suggest that he was worshipped before the Olympians, as he is fabled to be the god who taught Artemis to hunt and gave the gift of prophecy to Apollo.

⁵⁷ *Dionysiaca* 14.92.

⁵⁸ Herodotus 2.145, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 7.38

⁵⁹ This reflects the folk-etymology of the name Pan as coming from the term ‘all’.

⁶⁰ Garland (1995) 16

society, there were no laws in either Greece or Rome to enforce the punishment of parents who chose to raise a disabled child. Moreover, as the Minotaur myth shows, the parents of even the most bizarre-looking child, born from an adulterous union, could choose to keep it – although there were times in certain city states when this was prohibited. Unfortunately, no surviving version of the myth deals with Minos’s reaction to Minotaur’s birth and his motivation to rear him. However, what is evident from the myths is that they combine two explanations of unusual children’s births that serve two very different purposes. The ‘consolation’ myth places the responsibility for such an occasion on the gods, and possibly the sins of one’s ancestors, and the ‘warning’ myth urges one against perversion and adultery. One should therefore be extremely cautious of concluding straightaway from such myths that all congenitally disabled babies were regarded as monsters. As can be seen, the real origins of human-animal hybrids in Greek mythology lie centuries (and often miles) apart from their interpretations, and the interpretations often serve a very clear religious purpose.

It is not only the human-animal hybrids that were believed to be born in this way. The same ‘wrath-of-the-gods + sins-of-the-parents’ pattern is present in the mythical narratives that deal with congenitally disabled people and gods.

Hephaestus

‘If it was an unenviable fate to be a handicapped [*sic*] human being,’ writes Garland, ‘hardly less unenviable was the fate of the crippled fire-god Hephaistos, a solitary misfit among an unageing population of divinely perfect deities.’⁶¹ Whether Hephaestus’s story is truly so negative will be addressed later, in the chapter on blindness, along with the possible reasons the fire god took this shape in the Greek imagination. This chapter addresses the question of the origins of his disability, and its meaning for Homer’s audience in antiquity.

The circumstances surrounding Hephaestus’s birth were ‘thoroughly unpropitious’.⁶² According to Hesiod, Hera bore him without intercourse in order to spite her husband Zeus,⁶³ – apparently for having given birth to Athena on his own.⁶⁴ There seems to be some confusion as to whether Hephaestus’s lameness was congenital or not, Homer’s *Iliad* alone stating both that he broke his legs when he was thrown down from Olympus by Zeus and that it was Hera who exposed him because he was born lame.⁶⁵ The former view certainly predominated and is still the more popular one today. ‘No child of a natural union but a freakish aberration,’ Garland therefore continues, ‘he was thus the product of female rancour and spite.’⁶⁶ Again, like in the myths discussed above, it is unlikely that when the myth of Hephaestus’s birth emerged it had such negative connotations. The parallels between him and Athena, closely associated in cult as the patrons of artisans and craftspeople, are quite significant, and Athena had no visible physical variations. It is likely, however, that Hephaestus ‘became’ lame by birth in later versions of the myth created in the emerging patriarchal society. His disability thus confirmed the popular theory that the man was solely responsible for the generation of new life, and the woman was but the ‘nurse’ of it,⁶⁷ thus making Hera incapable of producing a healthy child on her own. The myth may also refer to the so-called ‘theory of maternal impressions’ – a popular

⁶¹ Garland (1995) 61

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Hesiod *Th.* 927

⁶⁴ *Hom. h. Pyth. Ap.* 323

⁶⁵ *Il.* 1.590-4, *Il.* 18.395-7. The *Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo* also states that Hephaestus was born disabled.

⁶⁶ Garland (1995) 62

⁶⁷ compare to Aeschilus *Eum.* 658-60

belief that the mother's mental state at time of conception is capable of influencing the appearance of her future child.⁶⁸

Thus again it is evident that the mythical story has elements that it acquired at a relatively late stage in its development, as an attempt at explaining the form of a cult that has existed long before. The explanation is promoting a certain worldview – in this case one in which a woman on her own cannot be responsible for conception, and therefore is dependent on the man. Moreover, the myth of Hephaestus's birth follows the traditional pattern where unusual conception results in the birth of an unusual child. As for Hera's rejection of her son, it should not be interpreted as a reflection of the social situation but rather as a demonstration of her character. As said before, the exposure of a child in antiquity depended on many more factors besides physical appearance, and it was by no means shameful to choose to keep a disabled child. For Hera, living among perfect-bodied gods, of course, it must have been different, but in her case, exposure was not physically possible, since Hephaestus was born immortal. Therefore, her choice to throw him off Mount Olympus should rather be regarded as an act of rage, much like when she conceived him in the first place.⁶⁹

As has been shown, the ancient Greek myths that deal with the birth of disabled children and 'monsters' clearly serve the purpose of warning against sinful behaviour, and most of them were created as attempts by later commentators to explain the position of a particular creature or deity within the Greek religion. Moreover, as Garland points out, although the Greeks did occasionally draw a connection between the birth of a disabled child and a forthcoming catastrophe, it is only very rarely that such births are recorded by historians or mentioned in literature as significant. 'This indifference on part of the Greeks to the portentous implications of monstrous births (*sic*) is one of the most noticeable differences between their religious belief-system and that of the Romans.'⁷⁰ Indeed, although there is a number of Greek texts referring to 'interpreters of *terata*', the word '*teras*' could refer to any strange occurrence – from leaping snakes to unusual weather.⁷¹ The Romans, on the other hand, paid special attention to the omens which 'occur in the conception and birth of men and cattle'⁷² and specially recorded them in historical documents.

Livy: An Account of Roman Prejudice

Divination played a central role in Rome's religious, political and daily life, and it is not unusual for a Roman historian to record various anomalies or 'signs' in connection with the events described. Tacitus specifically points out the omens surrounding the birth of Vespasian⁷³, and Suetonius records a number of anecdotes of omens predicting Augustus' future greatness;⁷⁴ it was even common among the Republican elite to establish their authority by claiming personal divine attention through divination.⁷⁵ But the interpretation of omens was an ambiguous process, and what one considers a good omen could be an abhorrent prodigy to

⁶⁸ Garland (1995) 151

⁶⁹ Homer certainly supports this view when Hera is called 'brazen-faced' in *Il.* 18.396

⁷⁰ Garland (1995) 66

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Cicero *Div.* 1.93

⁷³ *Ann.* 2.78. See also Morgan (1996)

⁷⁴ *Aug.* 94.

⁷⁵ see Ripat (2006) 155

another. Therefore, most signs were interpreted as potentially disastrous, and so ‘a dire message from the divine was no doubt a hot potato most people would prefer to pass on rather than claim.’⁷⁶ And passed on they were.

A record was kept by the senators and the *pontifici* of the various prodigies that were reported from all ends of the empire – including ‘monstrous births.’ It is possible that the parents of a visibly unusual child understood its birth as ominous for themselves or their families and chose to interpret it on their own. But a great number of such occasions was yearly reported to the Senate, especially if the parents of the ‘prodigy’ were of lower social standing – the Romans believed that the recipient of a divine sign could only be of the highest possible importance. When such births were reported to the Senate, they were understood as events of special importance for the state and interpreted accordingly.

One of the most extensive accounts of prodigies of this kind has come down to us via Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*, who connects them to important events in Rome’s history that they seem to have portended. The children whom Livy regards as prodigies range in the severity of their deformity from a two-headed boy born in Veii to a girl born with teeth in Auximum.⁷⁷ What is significant about these portents, however, is that they are recorded, first, together with congenital deformities among animals, and, second, that they are almost always referred to as abhorrent and disgusting. The following entry by Livy for the Gallic Revolt is typical of the genre:

Disgusting offspring of animals were reported in many places. Among the Sabine peoples one child was born of uncertain sex, and another sixteen-year-old was discovered of indeterminate sex. At Frusino a lamb was born with a pig’s head, at Sinuessa a pig with a man’s head, and on common land at Lucania a colt with five feet. All these vile and monstrous creatures suggested that nature was confounding the species.⁷⁸

The Romans were evidently adverse not only to minor aversions of what they perceived as the natural order (such as natal teeth) but to any commingling of species or sexes. Livy also says that the most abhorrent congenital deformity was intersexuality and tells of specific rites of expiation that were introduced for intersexes.⁷⁹ They were to be ‘banished from Roman territory, far from contact with her soil, and drowned in the sea,’⁸⁰ often in a sealed wooden box to eliminate any chance of survival. ‘The fact that intersexuals (*sic*) were exposed at sea,’ Garland writes, ‘and not outside the city walls, the customary dumping ground for more conventional human rejects, is a sure sign of the extremity of loathing which [they] aroused.’⁸¹

However, even the loathing passage from Livy provided above demonstrates that the treatment of children with visible physical variations in ordinary times was a lot more positive. The fact that one of the intersex prodigies was sixteen suggests that the parents chose to keep their child in the first place, without immediately notifying the Senate of this sign of impending catastrophe. The words chosen by Livy in this passage are significant themselves. He writes that the prodigy was ‘discovered’, meaning, first, that it was not the parents but someone else who thought it important to report the youth’s unusual physiology; and second, that such ‘prodigies’ were sought out deliberately. Cicero has observed this tendency to seek and

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 161

⁷⁷ 41.21.12

⁷⁸ 31.12.6-8. See Garland (1995) 68

⁷⁹ 27.11.4

⁸⁰ 27.37.6

⁸¹ Garland (1995) 68

exaggerate such signs, stating that ‘the reports are not only more readily believed in times of anxiety and danger, but also invented with greater impunity.’⁸² Even Livy himself observed that ‘at the mention of one prodigy others were also reported, as usually happens.’⁸³

Moreover, as Garland observes, the practice of expiating human prodigies gradually ceased to perform its public function, and the former practice became despicable in the eyes of later commentators.⁸⁴ Diodorus Siculus, Livy’s older contemporary, notably stated that intersexes should never again be expiated, describing them as people ‘whose nature is the same as everyone else’s and who are not monsters.’ Clearly, it was only a brief time – and one when the Roman state felt like its very existence was in danger – when children with congenital disabilities were treated as *monstri* indicating forthcoming disaster. And even during that time, as can be seen from the Livy passage, parents would often be reluctant to report their child’s condition to their betters, evidently not regarding their newborn as a monster or a portent of catastrophic events.

Conclusions

The choice of rearing or not rearing a child with physical variations in ancient Greece and Rome rested on a number of factors – from aesthetics to the political and religious life of the state, but not purely on disability as one we understand it today. This is not to say that the Greeks or Romans were particularly humane and enlightened in their attitude to congenitally disabled. Two things, however, are evident from the texts studied that challenge the modern perception of this attitude in modern popular culture.

First, it must be admitted that even within the boundaries of the Greco-Roman world congenital disability was treated differently in different times and regions. Indeed, ‘few areas of human experience are more illustrative of the essential difference in the religious outlook between the [Greek and Roman] cultures.’⁸⁵ But even within the more hostile environment of ancient Rome the social attitude was not stable, and we detect a gradual decline in the expiation of human portents. Second, that myths should not be regarded as exact reflections of reality since, as has been shown, origin myths of ‘monsters’ are temporally quite distant from their characters’ real origins. Moreover, these myths demonstrate that even the worst departure from the norm in the ancient mind – a crossover between the human and the animal – would not necessarily prevent the parents from deciding to rear the child.

To paraphrase Rose, the popular depiction of the killing of ‘defective babies’ in ancient Greece and Rome says more about present-day beliefs about our own society rather than about the ancient world.⁸⁶

⁸² *Div.* 2.58.

⁸³ 27.37.2.

⁸⁴ Garland (1995) 70

⁸⁵ *ibid.*: 72

⁸⁶ Rose (2003) 49

III. ‘Maimed in his Sight, Maimed in his Legs’⁸⁷

“A one-eyed man is much more incomplete than a blind man. He knows what he lacks.”
— Victor Hugo, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*

In the modern imagination, visually impaired people occupy a special place in the ancient world. The stories of the blind seer Tiresias, the poet Homer, and singer Thamyris have been the centre of most discussions of blindness in antiquity. This has led to anachronistic assumptions about the treatment of the blind and visually impaired in ancient Greece, while paying very little attention to Rome. The prevalent notion arising from these myths is that the blind were segregated and alienated from society, and that “many Greeks viewed blindness as a fate worse than death [and] saw blindness as a punishment from the gods.”⁸⁸ Rose argues that such modern understanding of blindness twists the ancient Greek tales of it as underpinnings for discrimination against blind people in the modern world.⁸⁹ She shows that the story of blind people in Ancient Greece was neither glorious nor dismal, noting that “... in the ancient world, sighted people knew blind and sight-impaired people well enough to understand the abilities and limitations of failing vision and that there was not the cultural gulf between the sighted and the blind that exists today,”⁹⁰ – because the potential that one may become blind, or otherwise visually impaired, was a simple fact of life given the state of medical science at the time.⁹¹ Neither were the visually impaired routinely associated with evil: there are no sources to confirm that ‘a person with a squint or a cataract would be considered to have the signs of the evil eye.’⁹² Quite oppositely, blindness in one or both eyes was more commonly associated with heroism and virtue.⁹³

There existed, moreover, a mythical association between the blind or one-eyed and the lame, or one-footed, which will be examined further. From the folkloric staple of the blind man carrying the lame on his back, described in the epigram which gives this chapter its title, to the archaic association between these characteristics and shamanism preserved in Roman myth, to close textual link between the blind singer Demodocus in the god Hephaestus, this connection is prevalent in the stories about the visually impaired. This common association, as will be shown, has roots in ancient Indo-European myth that linked such impairment to magic.⁹⁴

Blindness was common enough in both cultures for people living with this condition to adjust and live an ordinary life with the help of their families, society.⁹⁵ The slow-paced, low-traffic environment of the ancient Mediterranean village was also an advantage. But a visually impaired person relying on their family and their remaining senses is not the prime material for legends, and divine compensation such as musical talent or the gift of prophecy “makes a more durable tale.”⁹⁶ But even these “durable tales” can tell a lot about the ancient world’s attitude to blindness – and disability in general. Some of the most powerful of such tales are told by

⁸⁷ Philippus 9.11.

⁸⁸ Covey (1998) 192

⁸⁹ Rose (2003) 92.

⁹⁰ *ibid.* 93.

⁹¹ See Chapter 1

⁹² Bohigian (1997) 91

⁹³ see pp. 20-22

⁹⁴ see p. 21

⁹⁵ see Rose (2003) 79-94 for Greece and Trentin (2013) 89-111 for Rome.

⁹⁶ *ibid.* 80.

Homer. The blindness of the poet himself is a myth⁹⁷ of a different kind, as will be shown further. But the image of Homer as the blind bard has had significant influence on the reception of the mythical stories he recounts.

Thamyris

One of the most well-known blind figures of Greek myth, Thamyris was believed to be the first blind bard. Homer tells his story in the second book of the *Iliad*. Thamyris was a skilful musician who boasted that he could surpass the Muses in competition. For this, Homer says, they maimed him, making him forget his song and lyre-playing.⁹⁸ The moral of the story is as clear-cut as in the myths of monstrous birth: do not challenge the gods, lest you be punished, for they are more powerful. This story has heavily influenced the modern conception of the ancient Greek blind as estranged and despised on the grounds that they must be sinners. However, an attentive reader of the *Iliad* we have today may notice that no word for ‘blind’ is used.

As noted in the introduction, the Greek term for ‘maimed’, *pêros*, can mean anything from missing limbs to being bald. It does not indicate blindness specifically, and there is little evidence of it being used to describe this condition. The title of this chapter refers to one of the few such examples, an epigram describing two disabled men collaborating to compensate for each other’s loss, but without any indication of ‘sight’ it is impossible to tell whether Homer used *pêros* in the same way. It is more likely, as Davison observes, that the maiming that took away the bard’s song and lyre-craft was, in modern terms, a condition of the nervous system, being ‘paralysed in voice and hand,’ which would also account for the singer’s forgetfulness.⁹⁹ Indeed, ‘an audience hearing the *Iliad* we read would hardly have known that Thamyris was blinded, unless they had further information, surviving to us or lost.’¹⁰⁰ William Whallon, who observed this, further notes that a word like *tuphlos*, the most generic term for a person who has no sight at all, could have been used instead of *pêros* without a fault in the rhythm.¹⁰¹ The lack of details makes it impossible to determine the exact nature of the maiming.

However, later writers and scribes began to interpret the myth and move towards the idea of blinding. The Thamyris of Sophoclean tragedy may have been either completely blind or blind in one eye. Whallon shows that the (partial) blinding of Thamyris in the play was necessary for the convenience of staging, because it difficult to show paralysis or forgetfulness on stage, while the use of a two-coloured mask makes it easy to communicate the loss of an eye.¹⁰² Apart from this, as Whallon suggests further Sophocles saw the theme of blinded bards as central to blind Homer’s work and chose to interpret the ‘maiming’ accordingly.¹⁰³ This proto-psychoanalytic readership resulted in establishing a connection between Thamyris and Demodocus, the blind bard of the *Odyssey*, with the crucial difference that while Demodocus received ‘good and evil’ from the Muse, Thamyris suffered two evils, being both blind and deprived of singing. The Byzantine scholia (Ven. A) rebuke Classical writers for this

⁹⁷ This does not mean Homer was not blind – it simply means that it is an image brought down over generations of subjective reception.

⁹⁸ *Il.* 2.594-600

⁹⁹ Davison (1954) 213

¹⁰⁰ Whallon (1964) 9

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*; see also Lesky (1951)

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

subjective interpretation, pointing out through the same comparison with Demodocus that it could not harm a singer to lose his sight, and the maiming of Thamyris must have been of a different nature.¹⁰⁴ But the majority of Homer's later readers agreed that if blind Homer tells of the blind singer Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, he must also have explored this theme in the *Iliad*.

But one should not yield to the temptations of circular logic. It is, indeed, highly plausible that Homer himself was blind, since the theme of blindness plays a much bigger part in his works than in any other ancient author's we know of, and he was known to his relatively close contemporaries as 'a blind man [who] lives on rocky Chios.'¹⁰⁵ But it is irrational to assume that this makes every singer mentioned in the poems, maimed or not, also blind. "A blind Homer could have told of a blind Demodocus who gained his song at the cost of his eyes, and might have told of Thamyris as a singer maimed of his song, but would not have told of Thamyris as a singer whose song ended with his loss of sight."¹⁰⁶ The text itself, as has been shown, suggests an injury of a different kind. The use of this myth as evidence of ill-treatment of the blind in ancient Greece is therefore groundless, more telling of modern society's views than ancient realities.

Demodocus on Hephaestus

The story of Demodocus himself must be addressed too – but not only because of its influence on other myths of blindness. The eighth book of Homer's *Odyssey* is a unique account of the Greeks' perception of disability. It tells of the blind singer Demodocus entertaining the guests at Alcinous's feast with a tale of Hephaestus's cuckolding. Since no first-hand account from a disabled person in Ancient Greece survives, this is one of the most important extant narratives of disability. It presents the story of one disabled character from the point of view of another, creating a much more positive tale than is commonly believed. It is in a way a version of the fable about the collaboration between a man 'maimed in his sight' and one 'maimed in his legs'.

Demodocus appears in book eight as an entertainer at a feast on the island of the Phaeacians, where Odysseus was shipwrecked after seven years of imprisonment on Calypso's island. He is described from the outset as a blind man, being led in and out by a herald,¹⁰⁷ seemingly demonstrating his powerlessness and vulnerability. However, this is mainly because he is in a new setting, during a feast – an occasion that makes any space tricky to navigate even for the sighted. Normally, especially in the setting of an ancient Greek *demos* with its complicated and static topography it would have been easy for a blind person to move around on their own.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Demodocus's power lies primarily in his artistic talent. He sings several songs throughout the course of the feast, noticeably altering the mood of the characters and, narrative-wise, promoting the plot of the epic – importantly, when he entertains the guests with the song about Aphrodite's adultery after Odysseus has been insulted by a young Phaeacian.¹⁰⁹

The mini-epic song of Aphrodite's adultery and the revenge of Hephaestus has been read as a *mise en abyme* – as a representation of the work as a whole, reflecting on 'both the content of

¹⁰⁴ *Rhes.* 924f.; see Whallon (1964) 10

¹⁰⁵ *Hom. Hymn Apollo* 172

¹⁰⁶ Whallon (1964) 12

¹⁰⁷ *Od.* 8.62, 106

¹⁰⁸ Rose (2003) 88

¹⁰⁹ *Od.* 8.266-369

the *Odyssey* and its poetic form.’¹¹⁰ An obvious parallel is that between the revenge of Hephaestus and the killing of the suitors that is to follow: like Odysseus, the lame Hephaestus defeats his competitor through cunning and artistry, and the song thus assures the hero that ‘wits and intelligence are superior to mere physical strength,’¹¹¹ encouraging him to take revenge and influencing the plot. But the choice of this particular myth is also conditioned by the blindness of Demodocus, who has some parallels with the god.

Homer creates the first association between the two by means of formulaic language. As Rinon observes, Demodocus is called *periklitós* (‘highly renowned’, ‘famous’¹¹²), which is the epithet of Hephaestus at 8.287, 300, 349, and 357.¹¹³ In addition, both are artists associated with the divine: Hephaestus is a god and Demodocus is god-like.¹¹⁴ The second association is based on their disability. The blindness of Demodocus is mentioned as soon as he is introduced, while Hephaestus is described as significantly limited by his legs, which, as discussed before, may have caused him to be thrown down from Olympus by Hera. And although the modern reader expects them to be miserable in their eternal struggle in a world of able-bodied men, the bard and the god are shown to have a decent position in their societies. Both seem to be hindered by their disabilities and apparently subservient to others – Demodocus relies on the hospitality of Alcinous and his guests to receive his meal,¹¹⁵ and Hephaestus often works at the request of other gods.¹¹⁶ But this makes them no more dependent on others than any average craftsman or singer. Demodocus, despite being blind, is certainly in a safer position at the court of Alcinous than sighted Phemius, who is held against his will by Penelope’s suitors.¹¹⁷ Likewise, compared to the fate of the abled-bodied Daedalus, practically imprisoned by Minos on Crete, Hephaestus enjoys a life of privilege, working for other gods in exchange for favours. Even when in the *Iliad* he voluntarily assigns himself the role of cupbearer for other gods and clowns and makes a joke out of his gait,¹¹⁸ it is him who controls the narrative of laughter: ‘If Hephaestus makes a joke at his own expense, it stops the other gods from doing so. Therefore, if the gods are going to laugh at him, by controlling the narrative, Hephaestus forces them to laugh with him and not at him.’¹¹⁹ In this particular song in the *Odyssey* Hephaestus even manages to invert the narrative and subject Ares to public humiliation, directing the laughter of the gods at him. Like his Olympian counterpart, Demodocus controls the mood of the feast, and it is his power to generate laughter or tears. He uses his artistry to create a jovial atmosphere after Odysseus has been insulted by the young Phaeacian, Euryalus, in a way similar to Hephaestus entertaining the gods after the quarrel between Zeus and Hera in the *Iliad*: both distract everyone’s attention from the quarrel through humour and laughter. Moreover, Demodocus directs the laughter of the guests at Ares and makes them praise Hephaestus’ inventiveness, offering the contemporary reader an insight into the way the blind singer saw disability and wanted it to be seen. As can be seen, both the blind man and the lame god participate in social life and work as successfully as any ancient craftsman or singer.

¹¹⁰ Rinon (2006) 208

¹¹¹ Newton (1987) 12

¹¹² *Od.* 8.83

¹¹³ Rinon (2006) 212; see also Stanley (1993) 311

¹¹⁴ *Od.* 8.43

¹¹⁵ *Od.* 8.448-52

¹¹⁶ Such as Thetis in *Il.* 18.368-467 – although it must be remembered that Hephaestus was once saved by Thetis when he fell down from Olympus (*Il.* 18.369)

¹¹⁷ *Od.* 1.154-155; 23.353-54

¹¹⁸ *Il.* 1.597-8; see also Garland (1995) 73-86

¹¹⁹ Lee (2018) 10; also Brown (1989) 287.

There is, however, one important area in which they cannot directly take part – that is, military service. ‘To be a real Greek man,’ writes Rose, ‘was to be a soldier.’¹²⁰ Neither the bard nor the god are renowned fighters, although they do nevertheless play an important role in the world of war. Hephaestus’s making of armour for Achilles, for instance, and setting fire to Scamandrus are crucial moments of the *Iliad*.¹²¹ The singer, too, plays a crucial role in the Trojan war. He is the one who immortalises its heroes in song. Demodocus and other bards are essential instruments of *kléos* – and *kléos*, particularly commemoration in song, is essential for wresting the hero from oblivion, although Hephaestus’s participation in the war is much more active.¹²²

What Homer rarely talks about when it comes to heroes, however, is that they would often also become disabled during the war – precisely because of *kléos*. Although it is impossible to estimate exactly the percentage of soldiers who sustained eye injuries in battle, traumatic blinding must have been common enough given the lack of eye protectors on helmets, making the eyes an easy target.

The Greek Hero – Blinded

The Greek concept of heroism that required the hero to achieve the ultimate glory of death in battle¹²³ shaped heroic narratives accordingly. It is well-known that Homeric heroes bear no battle scars. If wounded, they either recover in a few days or die on the battlefield,¹²⁴ since it was considered an unfitting end for an epic hero to die as a cripple in his old age. The *Iliad* shows only one instance of blindness sustained in battle: we have the shocking scene in which Peisander’s eyeballs fall out on the ground before Menelaus’s feet.¹²⁵ The blinded hero does not survive, since the falling-out of his eyes is caused by Menelaus hitting him with extreme force on the forehead. This episode demonstrates Homer’s focus on blinding as a theme, but cannot be considered an illustration of potentially disabling trauma, since the injury Homer describes is entirely fictional and could not occur in reality. ‘No walking wounded’, as a Cambridge commentary notes.¹²⁶

In Homer’s poems, wounds have a strong symbolic value. Menelaus is the first Achaean to be injured by the Trojans, as he is at the origin of the war, and his wound is a cowardly one, sustained from an unseen enemy’s arrow.¹²⁷ More often, however, being wounded is a form of punishment, as in the case of Aphrodite (and even Ares), who sustains a wound for transgressing into the realm of war.¹²⁸ Therefore, for Homer to show a hero made blind through fighting would mean to indicate blindness as a symbolic punishment, and the absence of such an episode from his poems is significant in itself.

But time passed and wars were fought. ‘By the end of the fifth century and following the numerous conflicts of the Peloponnesian war,’ Samama writes in her account of wounded

¹²⁰ Rose (2003) 92

¹²¹ *Il.* 18.478-539, *Il.* 21.342-76; see also Lee (2018) 2

¹²² Vernant (1996) 56; see also Morris (1989)

¹²³ see Clarke (2004) and Vernant (1996)

¹²⁴ Hermann Frölich, who counted all the injuries in the *Iliad*, found that of the 147 injuries described most wounds to the head or upper body were deadly, – see Frölich (1879)

¹²⁵ *Il.* 13.616–18

¹²⁶ Lateiner (2004) 13

¹²⁷ *Il.* 4.139–149

¹²⁸ *Il.* 5.330–349. She is thus punished by Athena, the warrior goddess, through Diomedes, whom Athena had asked to wound Aphrodite should she join battle.

heroes in ancient Greece, ‘direct battle wounds and consequences of the war... had affected so many cities and families that mentalities had changed.’¹²⁹ Indeed, from the end of the fifth century onwards survival became more important than the *kléos* of death in action. This brought about the popularity of injured heroes, and loss or partial loss of sight also became a mark of honour. King Philip II of Macedonia was one of such scarred icons, and the story of his loss of an eye during a siege was repeated by a number of writers as confirming his bravery and experience.¹³⁰

The One-Eyed Roman Warrior and the Barbaric Gods

War was the duty of every male Roman citizen. The state’s military ambitions and frequent wars of conquest certainly made battle traumas, including blindness, a common phenomenon from the earliest days of Rome’s existence. Romans did indeed know of that many a soldier would be left completely blind as a result of battlefield trauma. Lucan, for instance, provides us with a vivid description of the soldier Tyrrhenus whose eyes were dashed out by a missile at the siege of Massilia.¹³¹ But some tales of eye loss – by heroes in the early days of Rome – may have originated even earlier than the Roman civilization itself.

Although the Roman god of war, unlike Scandinavian Tyr or Celtic Lugh, does not sport any physical impairments, some of the favourite of Rome’s legendary heroes share the characteristics of those warrior-gods. In an article on *monophthalmia* in ancient Rome Africa offers a whole roster of one-eyed heroes.¹³² Among them, Horatius Cocles, whose agnomen quite literally means ‘one-eyed’, is a figure of doubtful historicity famed for defeating the Etruscans in the sixth century. Horatius’s biographers provide no precise explanation of his partial blindness, and some even suggest that the name originated from his rather cyclopean appearance, his eyebrows meeting right above his flat nose.¹³³ However, it is more likely that Horatius was never a man at all, but a god or legendary hero.¹³⁴

In his response to Africa’s article, Moeller shows that one-eyed figures in Roman, Celtic and Germanic myth ‘form a complex that is held together by characteristics over and beyond monophthalmia.’¹³⁵ Georges Dumézil in his fundamental study of European mythology also points out the remarkable similarities between Horatius, the Irish Lugh and his son, the hero Cúchulainn, and Odin-Wotan.¹³⁶ Horatius and Odin are one-eyed, whereas Lugh closes one eye when he fights, and Cúchulainn makes one of his eyes fall into its socket during his ‘battle transformation’. Horatius is lame, while Lugh and Cúchulainn stand on one leg when fighting or performing magic. There are other parallels between them, but they all indicate that Horatius, like many other figures of early Roman history, is a euhemerised god. ‘Long after his exploits,’

¹²⁹ Samama (2013) 233

¹³⁰ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca* 16.34.5; Strabo, *Geographica* 8.6.15; Justin, *Historiarum epitome* 7.6

¹³¹ *Pharsalia* 3.709–721; see also Trentin (2013) 100. It must be noted that this scene is likely to be a partial tribute to Homer’s blinding of Peisander discussed above, with the hero Menelaus substituted by an indifferent device to contrast the idealised heroic time to the Roman civil war. Nevertheless, Lucan is one of the most naturalistic Latin authors, and this scene certainly shows an awareness of and horror at this kind of trauma.

¹³² Africa (1970).

¹³³ Plutarch, *Poplicola* 16.4–7

¹³⁴ Similarly, the story of Gaius Mucius Scaevola, whose *cognomen* means ‘left-handed’, must have been an interpretation of a myth shared with Scandinavia. Scaevola, captured by the Etruscans (the counterparts of the Norse giants), put his right hand into a burning fire to show them he was not intimidated by torture, and burnt it to ashes (*Livy Ab Urbe Condita* 2.12–13) – just like the Norse war-god, Tyr, lost his right hand in the mouth of the giant wolf Fenrir.

¹³⁵ Moeller (1975) 402

¹³⁶ Dumézil (1944) 169–72

Africa writes, ‘Horatius was connected with a crude statue of a one-eyed, lame figure, and the hero's lameness suggests that he may have originally been Vulcan.’¹³⁷ Whether he was indeed the smith-god or a different warrior deity that became lost to the Romans, the association with Vulcan on the Romans’ behalf is quite reasonable, since he is a magician, lame and associated with one-eyed figures – the cyclopes. Missing an eye, a hand or a leg, or even having a limp, was for the Celtic, Germanic and early Italic tribes the mark of a magician and a warrior.¹³⁸

This allowed many later military generals to enter the realm of myth. Among them are Sertorius, who was a general during the second civil war, and Hannibal. While Sertorius did indeed lose an eye as a result of a battle injury, Hannibal’s partial blindness was most likely caused by an infection.¹³⁹ The Carthaginian commander became a mythical figure in the eyes of both the Romans and the barbaric troops he recruited. While Roman writers in their imagination surrounded him with their own gods and goddesses, either helpful or threatening to blind him completely,¹⁴⁰ he must have benefitted extremely from the Lugh-Odin cult, being seen as a man of supernatural powers due to his impairment. In Africa’s words, ‘long after the great captain had returned to the mysterious land from whence he had come, the barbarians of Spain and Italy who had served him recounted the exploits of the guileful, one-eyed war chief, who could change shape, had supernatural contacts, and had once led them against the hated Romans.’¹⁴¹ Sertorius, too, was seen as a semi-divine leader, at least in direct communication with the gods. In his figure, the Iberian Celts he commanded against his Roman enemies saw ‘the religious aspect of the one-eyed war chief,’¹⁴² similar to Lugh, who was the head of their pantheon.

The Romans and their neighbours evidently did not share the concept of the ‘evil eye’, not fearing to be cursed by the gaze of a one-eyed person. Quite oppositely, the loss of an eye was often associated in their militaristic minds with heroism, and on a deeper, mythological level, with divine powers and magic. Some of this attitude survives to this day. Despite modern scepticism, there is still something supernatural in the figures of admiral Nelson or Kutusov, who are the heroes of modern legend, perhaps embodying the ancient concept of the god-like warrior.

The Good, the Bad and the Divine Emperor

But it was not only heroes and gods who were marked by eye loss. A number of Rome’s urban legends focus on the idea of sight taken away or restored by an emperor.

Stories of emperors gouging out the eyes of their slaves,¹⁴³ their enemies or political opponents are particularly abundant, passed down by Suetonius and the anonymous *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, although certainly not entirely true. Nero supposedly fought his political enemies in this way, and Suetonius notes that he often ran the risk of losing his own eyes when disputes got too heated.¹⁴⁴ Domitian is also said to have attempted to gouge out the eyes of his would-

¹³⁷ Africa (1970) 530

¹³⁸ see Moeller (1975) 404-405

¹³⁹ Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 22.2.10

¹⁴⁰ e.g. Coelius Antipater *Historicorum Romanorum Reliquiae* 1 frag. 34

¹⁴¹ Africa (1970) 531; Africa’s conclusion that the figures of Odin and Lugh are therefore *based* on Hannibal, however, is false.

¹⁴² *ibid.* 534

¹⁴³ see Trentin (2011)

¹⁴⁴ Suet. *Nero* 26.2

be assassin with his bare hands,¹⁴⁵ although according to Tacitus, the worst eye-related torture this emperor could perform was his own malevolent gaze fixed upon his victim.¹⁴⁶ A unique case is the legend told of Commodus, who ‘dubbed one-eyed (*luscinius*) those whom he had disfigured by plucking out one of their eyes (*singulos tulisset oculos*).’¹⁴⁷ He did not stop at the eyes, however, and also used the word ‘one-footed’ (*monopodios*) for those he deprived of one of their feet. Stories of this kind, especially the latter one, are highly unlikely to be factual, or are only partially so. But they skilfully employ mythical tropes in order to schematise the emperors in question as categorically ‘bad’. The blinding plot has had a symbolic significance since at least as early as in Homer, and these three anecdotes hark back to the famous episode in the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus defeats the Cyclops.¹⁴⁸ Domitian’s story is the most similar, since both he and Odysseus use blinding to escape death, but it is nevertheless represented as a shameful and cowardly act, the danger brought upon the blinder by his own foolishness and hubris. The story of Commodus is even more obviously mythological, since the ‘bad emperor’ in question finds it necessary to give every one-eyed man disfigured by him a lame counterpart, fulfilling once more the ancient connection between a man ‘maimed in his sight’ and one ‘maimed in his legs’, albeit without belief in their supernatural powers.

Odysseus’s act is paralleled also in the legend told of Hadrian, who allegedly stabbed out the eye of a slave with a stylus,¹⁴⁹ much like the Greek hero blinded Polyphemus with a charred pike. Galen recounts that, unlike the emperors mentioned above, Hadrian felt great remorse at this act of rage, but could not give the slave the one thing he wanted – to have the eye back. Although this particular story is not implausible, other sources propose that, being a ‘good’ emperor, Hadrian did receive the gift of restoring lost eyesight. In *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, we are told that an old blind man visited Hadrian when the emperor was ill with a fever, and upon being touched by him, the blind man regained his eyesight, while Hadrian was cured of his illness. This story is certainly influenced by Christian narratives of Christ and the apostles healing by touch, as opposed to traditional Greco-Roman miraculous healing through sacrifice.¹⁵⁰ Even more obviously Christian is the tale about Vespasian, who allegedly restored one man’s vision by spitting in his eyes and another’s withered leg by touching his heel.¹⁵¹ In this case, the Roman author simply added the parallel with lameness to an extant Biblical story in which Jesus cures blindness by spitting in a man’s eyes.¹⁵² Such legends of miraculous healing were crucial in the promotion of Hadrian and Vespasian’s reputation as a ‘good’, if not ‘divine’, emperors, and Christian narrative patterns certainly proved very useful in this regard, as they allowed them to be portrayed as so pious and close to the gods that no sacrifice was required for a miracle. However, as can be seen from Vespasian’s anecdote, when using foreign narratives the Romans’ Indo-European mind still returned to the ancient association between the lame-footed and the blind, the two essential qualities of the magician, even though they had been deprived of their legendary powers.

¹⁴⁵ Suet. *Domitianus* 17.2

¹⁴⁶ Tacitus *Agricola* 45

¹⁴⁷ Trentin (2013) 102

¹⁴⁸ *Od.* 9.313–382

¹⁴⁹ Galen, *De proprii ianimi cuiuslibet affectuum dignotione et curatione* 4

¹⁵⁰ see Cilliers (2019) 197-218

¹⁵¹ Suet., *Vespasianus* 7.2–3

¹⁵² Mark 8.22–26; John 9.6–7; the Christian view of disability was quite different from that of the Romans: when asked whether the cause of congenital blindness should be ascribed to the sin of the individual or to that of their parents (see Chapter 2), Christ replies that such a person exists ‘so that God’s work may be revealed in him.’ (John 9.3)

Conclusions

These myths reflect the truths and anxieties about sight and blindness in the ancient world.¹⁵³ Although ancient Greece and Rome were certainly not a ‘disability-friendly’ society in the modern sense, lacking the accommodations for the blind and visually impaired that exist today, in many ways their attitude was a lot more positive than the modern one. With only primitive medicine, dangerous manual labour and frequent wars, most people in ancient Greece and Rome lived with the prospect of losing at least some of their sight due to illness or injury.

Evidently, ancient Greeks had little reason to assume that visual impairment was a mark of evil. The mythological evidence that the Greeks saw blindness as punishment is flawed and distorted by centuries of modern reception. The myth of Thamyras, as has been shown, contains no definitive reference to blindness and has been interpreted in a semi-psychoanalytic way in the light of Homer’s potential blindness. The story of the definitely blind Demodocus, too, has been shown to be more positive by far than modern readers tend to imagine. And the very fact that Homer, who does see battle injuries as punishment, refrains from creating a figure of a blinded war veteran is telling of the poet’s attitude to blindness and the way he wished it to be seen.

As has been shown, the Romans, too, praised certain kinds of sight loss, preserving the ancient belief in the connection between visual and physical impairment and magic, or even divinity. In the archaic times it certainly meant that a person ‘maimed in his legs’ and ‘maimed in his sight’ was treated with considerable respect, being, like Demodocus, ‘god-like’. Even later in history, when the Romans and the Greeks had forgotten about the origins of these beliefs, maimed military commanders were still seen as honourable and somewhat supernatural, as were blind singers. The idea of visual impairment was also crucial for the Roman imperial propaganda, using mythical tropes to portray certain emperors as categorically ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

Although the evidence considered is purely mythological and, for the purposes of this paper, rather sparse, it nevertheless shows that visual impairment and impairment in the limbs had different connotations in antiquity than today.

¹⁵³ Rose (2003) 93

Conclusion: Against Ableism in the Classics

An eternal problem of disability studies – and one too painfully familiar to anyone living with a disability – is confronting the myths surrounding these conditions. Modern society has created its own discriminatory stereotypes¹⁵⁴, but it has also re-interpreted ancient narratives of disability to serve as ‘historical’ underpinnings for today’s negative attitudes. But, even worse, most non-Classicists are completely unaware that disability existed at all in the ancient world – a problem that this work has addressed in the first chapter.

Ignoring the existence of disability, especially when it comes to studying Classical culture, is a common mistake, and it is understandable; a person without a physical impairment has little reason to give it a second thought, and someone whose acquaintance with the Classical world is limited to modern films like *300* is entitled to feel surprised upon hearing that disabled people ‘already existed’ in ancient Greece and Rome. But ‘this constant lack of thought,’ as Sharples writes, ‘becomes a very real problem when these same barriers exist in the study of disability itself.’¹⁵⁵ She mentions, for instance, not being able to attend a conference about mobility impairment in the Classics because the venue was on the second floor of a building with no lift access. Cases like this demonstrate that modern society, indeed, no longer sees its disabled as monsters or divine signs – sometimes it does not see them at all. This work, therefore, has brought forward an important yet so often overlooked aspect of Classical myth – its relationship with disability and people’s attitudes towards it. And although it is only a small part of a greater movement towards a more inclusive academic, some important conclusions can be made from its findings.

Mythical narratives, although they cannot be relied upon as historical evidence, nevertheless reveal an attitude quite different from the modern one, indicating that the fate of a disabled person in antiquity was not always and entirely dismal. It is clear even from the Greek and Latin languages that they did not see people with special needs as a distinct and separate group, and therefore the treatment of a disabled person depended on a variety of factors beyond their condition. There were, indeed, some unhappy times in Greek and Roman history, when (certain) physically unusual people were sought out and killed, but even in those times of intense social insecurity there already were those who disapproved of such actions, and who evidently tried to hide potential victims. But this was by no means a universal and permanent situation, so one must be careful when making generalizations about antiquity or ancient myth as a whole. Moreover, although it may seem obvious that Greek myth portrays congenital disabilities as monstrosities, and as punishment for sins, such representations had hardly anything to do with reality. Rather, they served as stern warnings against amoral behaviour, and there is no evidence to suggest that people affected by disabling conditions were perceived as evil. Quite oppositely, both Greeks and Romans preserved the ancient association between disability and divinity, and told stories of one-eyed heroes, lame gods and blind singers, which demonstrate that physical impairment had different connotations in those times than today.

This does not mean to say that in antiquity people with special needs were treated with more care than now. The realities of ancient and modern disabilities are indeed disparate. However, as the present work shows, Classical mythology had a number of positive narratives that could play a key part in modern teaching of literature, mythology and religion. If taught objectively,

¹⁵⁴ For instance, Freud (1958) claimed, using Shakespeare’s Richard III as his example, that all people with disabilities feel that they have been wronged by Nature and therefore are owed reparations, or else are full of neurotic self-deprecation.

¹⁵⁵ Sharples (2019)

stripped of the aesthetic, economic, religious, and medical assumptions about disability that we have in the modern world, these myths can help bring about the crucial change in our own attitudes.

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