

Celia Levy

Kristen Lindgren

Critical Disability Theory

03/14/2023

A Deep Dive into Disability in the Classical World:

An Analysis of Hephaestus¹

Language Disclaimer: The research paper has been written in clear and concise language to reach the widest possible audience. However, due to the nature of the paper technical terms will be employed when necessary. Certain vocabulary will be defined for the reader in the footnotes. Visit the bottom of the page for explanations and supplementary information.

The earliest writings about disability in the Western poetic tradition are attributed to descriptions or stories pertaining to Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire. As the only disabled Greek god, Hephaestus occupies a unique space in the Hellenistic world. While almighty and powerful, Hephaestus retains numerous humanlike qualities and experiences: (1) his power was learned, (2) his form, and (3) his experience as disabled god among the Gods. Hephaestus's treatment on Mount Olympus functions as evidence of the Hellenistic desire for physical perfection – the derision he experiences from other Olympians illustrates the lesser status he holds for being disabled despite also being a God.² I intend to study these Greek's conceptions of disability through an analysis of Hephaestus's origin story and the acquisition of his disability in order to illustrate how the Greek's preference for ideal body serves as a pre-modern example of discrimination against disabled people.

¹In Greek mythology, Hephaestus is the disabled god of fire and forgery.

²There are twelve gods in the Greek Pantheon. Zeus, the lightning god, serves as the chief deity. All of the other gods obey him or face his violent wrath.

Through myths of beauty and ugliness, Classical society laid the foundations for normalcy. The Greeks did not have a set idea of normalcy as exists in modern society. Instead of normal and abnormal, the Greeks employed the categorized through the lens of the ideal and the grotesque. As the desired aesthetic, the Greeks considered symmetry as the ideal. In the ancient Greek world, the ideal was expressed through sculptures of “*mytho-poetic bodies*,”³ which constituted depictions associated with traditional godlike features.⁴ It was accepted that human beings could not fulfill these standards; in relation to the gods, mankind was considered grotesque. The grotesque body existed in contrast to the ideal form. However, this undesirable appearance did not necessarily equate to disability. In fact, the grotesque “permeated culture (coexisting with ideal)...whereas the disabled body, a later concept, was formulated by a definition excluded from culture, society, the norm.”⁵ The ideal-grotesque existed on a scale, on which the ancient Greeks would have had *some* concept of a middle, but it would not have been particularly important unless an individual was visibly, spectacularly, disabled. Under this jurisdiction, disabled people were not a distinct minority group, but rather were members of the non-ideal majority.

The Greek concept of *Kalos Kagathos*, or ‘beautiful and good,’ supports the ideal-grotesque trope observed across myth.⁶ *Kalos Kagathos* involves a beautiful person being matched with an unconventional partner. While said partner was significantly less attractive, they would surpass their spouse in ethics and morale. The concept of *Kalos Kagathos* was primarily concerned with the aesthetics of symmetry.⁷ The Greeks highly valued physical beauty and

³ Qualities and features of the body that are derived from myth or poem. Mythopoetic bodies are not necessarily anatomically accurate regardless they are considered the ideal form.

⁴ Lennard Davis, “Constructing Normalcy” in *Enforcing Normalcy* (New York: Verso, 1995), 25.

⁵ Davis, “Constructing Normalcy,” 25.

⁶ Homer, *Iliad* 18.136 and *Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo* 310.

⁷ William Ebenstein, “Toward an Archetypal Psychology of Disability Based on the Hephaestus Myth,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26 (2006): 5.

symmetry aspiring towards an aestheticism in their daily life. This preoccupation with beauty involved assigning value to the body, including the bodies of disabled people. Disabled people in the ancient Greek world were not directly mocked for their abilities, but instead were labeled as non aesthetic because of their looks. Ugliness was a posit of life, not necessarily a disability. Thus, it is more likely that there was a scale of disability, with less prominent disabilities being more easily accepted into society than more disfiguring ones.⁸

In the Greco-Roman literary canon, the Hephaestus myth has multiple versions with numerous variations; scholarly dispute exists around his creation and the acquisition of his disability. Two dissonant stories emerge. The first argues that Hera bore Hephaestus by Zeus. In this narrative, she is dissatisfied with her son's looks and hurls him from Mount Olympus. During the fall, Hephaestus would acquire his disability. The other asserts that Hera conceived her child Hephaestus magically in response to Zeus birthing the goddess, Athena.⁹ However, unlike Athena, Hephaestus emerges as ugly and 'shriveled of foot,' causing an enraged Hera to cast him from Olympus.¹⁰ In both storylines, Hephaestus emerges disabled and must be rescued by the sea nymphs, Thetis and Eurynome, who nurse and shelter Hephaestus resuscitating him. After his fall, The demi-gods connect him with Cedalion, a disabled welder. In the following years, Cedalion instructed Hephaestus in the art of craftsmanship.¹¹ During his time learning under Cedalion, Hephaestus hones his skill and acquires his powers in metallurgy. Unlike the other Gods, whose gifts are inherent, Hephaestus must develop and work towards his proficiency

⁸ William Ebenstein, "Toward an Archetypal Psychology of Disability Based on the Hephaestus Myth," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26 (2006): 5.

⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony* 924 (text version 1).

¹⁰ *Iliad*.

¹¹ Adams, Ellen. *Disability Studies and the Classical Body: the Forgotten Other*. Ed. Ellen Adams. Abingdon, Oxon ;: Routledge, 219.

and prowess. This aspect of his existence further distinguishes him from the rest of the Olympians, thus othering him and creating a division between himself and the gods.

While studying under Cedalion, Hephaestus's personality develops into a cunning and strategic sense of self. Through his learned power, Hephaestus devises a plan to return to Mount Olympus. In his vengeful plan, Hephaestus binds his mother to a golden throne of his construction.¹² Following numerous attempts to free Hera, Dionysus summons Hephaestus back to Mount Olympus under the order to release his mother, Hera, from his trap (posited on the vase).¹³ The Olympians are impressed with his sly maneuver and invite him to dwell on Mount Olympus



with the remainder of the Pantheon.¹⁴ His experience is unique among the gods, for their “ideal” nature secures their presence. Upon his return, Hephaestus must constantly prove his godliness for his continued acceptance. His building abilities affirm his presence. While the other gods revel in leisure, Hephaestus constructs Mount Olympus. As the only god that works, his profession of divine artist, one generally occupied with hard physical labor, contrasts significantly with the rest of the gods. Unlike the other gods who safekeep their powers, Hephaestus shares the fruits of his labor with mortals, frequently forging armor for members of the Trojan and Greek fleets. So while he is not associated with socio-political power and

¹² Adams, *Disability Studies and the Classical Body: the Forgotten Other*, 218.

¹³ In the Vase painting titled *The Return of Hephaestus to Olympus*, Dionysus leads Hephaestus and Cedalion to Mount Olympus. Hephaestus appears here, riding on a mule, not as a bearded blacksmith god but as a young, beardless boy; you can clearly see his crippled feet, which were the reason why Hera threw him out of Olympus after birth. With Hephaestus, Cedalion and Dionysus and his exuberant entourage, a maenad with a large snake and a satyr blowing flutes, enter the heaven of the gods. The vase is housed in collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Austria.

<https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/56546/?offset=3&lv=list>

¹⁴ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.20.3.

struggles to maintain his palace on Olympus, he is powerful. Thus, his powers and personality permit his continued presence in Olympian society.

Although Hephaestus is eventually accepted by his fellow Olympians, his appearance continues to impact and influence his interactions with the other gods. During Hephaestus's first marriage, his wife, Aphrodite, frequently turns to Ares, another beautiful god, for sexual gratification.¹⁵ Aphrodite seeks out a conventionally attractive lover, because she perceives Hephaestus as sexually impotent. Although Hephaestus is physically capable of sex, his disability makes him unattractive to Aphrodite. Therefore, she has a sexual relationship with Ares, a god of ideal form. When Hephaestus learns about their affair, the God of Fire seeks retribution. He cleverly traps them in a magically crafted net. Upon their enclosure, Hephaestus invites the other Olympians to mock their entanglement.¹⁶ While the gods momentarily joke about Aphrodite's affair, they also inadvertently joke about Hephaestus's disability as his physical state influenced Aphrodite's actions.

Hephaestus's treatment reflects Greek beliefs and interactions with disabled members of society. In fact, the practice of deriding and mocking the disabled was well-established in the Greek world. Within Greek society, disability was a worthy topic for humor. Under the guise of a worthy topic for humor, the Olympians frequently mock and deride Hephaestus because of his disability. In Book 1 of the *Iliad*, Hephaestus intentionally exploits his disability for comedic purposes. When he rises to refill the other gods' cups, his ungainly walk serves as a source of laughter and relief. Hephaestus strategically distracts the Olympians from Zeus's threat of

¹⁵ *Iliad*.

¹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey* 8.266-369.

physical harm towards Hera.¹⁷ His mockery likely caused psychological harm.¹⁸ In spite of the deleterious psychological effects on Hephaestus, mocking the disabled in Ancient Greece was not viewed as malicious. By degrading his own disability, Hephaestus is brought *into* society. As the source of entertainment, Hephaestus can stay on Mount Olympus with the other gods.

Throughout classical society, value systems and myth were interconnected. Although hyperbolized, Greek Mythology still served as a reflection of the pervasive philosophical beliefs of the time. The Hephaestus myths reflected the culture and belief systems of the time. As a disabled god on the Pantheon, Hephaestus's story as a disabled god informs and inversely is informed by the culture of the time. His messaging and marketing influenced disability customs and practices.

¹⁷ Robert Garland. *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2010), 79.

¹⁸ Garland, 86.

Bibliography:

Adams, Ellen. *Disability Studies and the Classical Body : the Forgotten Other*. Edited by Ellen Adams, Routledge, 2021.

Davis, Lennard. *Enforcing Normalcy: disability, deafness and the body*. New York: Verso, 1995

Ebenstein, William, "Toward an Archetypal Psychology of Disability Based on the Hephaestus Myth," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26 (2006).

Garland, Robert. *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World*. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2010.

Hesiod, *Theogony*[text version 1] (trans. Evelyn-White). C.7th or 8th BC.

Homer, *Iliad*(trans. Lattimore). C.8th BC.

Homer, *Odyssey*(trans. Fagles). C.8th BC.

Pausanias, *Description of Greece*(trans. Jones). 2nd AD.