

Women and Disabilities in the Ancient Greek Society

The combination of disability studies and ancient history is a fairly new area of academic inquiry, and these fields' intersectionality with women's studies has been even less discussed. Although a few scholars have discussed the experience of disabled ancient Greek women, they are often generalized and conflated with women who were considered not aesthetically pleasing. This paper seeks to separate women who might be considered disabled from supposedly unattractive individuals, and look deeper into how ancient Greek society viewed and treated disabled women. Although the Greeks did not have a specific word that directly translates as "disabled" (Edwards 4), certain texts depict individuals who found it physically or mentally difficult (or even impossible) to fully participate in society, in ways that closely overlap with present-day definitions of disability. Through close readings of narratives from Herodotus and passages from the Hippocratic Corpus, I seek to illuminate the experiences of such women.

The first narrative I discuss concerns a Corinthian woman commonly known as Labda the Lamé, who is mentioned briefly in Herodotus' *Histories*. She is rejected by the entirety of the Corinthian upper class due to her so-called lameness (*χολόζ*), and she is forced to move to another city-state to marry (Herodotus 5.92). Labda serves as an example of how women with disabilities were treated and what being married to a disabled woman could mean for one's social standing. The Bacchiadae's rejection of Labda reinforces their own sense of nobility, and Eëtion's marriage to Labda emphasizes his own low social standing. In my analysis of this narrative, I draw comparisons with the Babylonian marriage auction also contained in Herodotus (1.196). According to Herodotus, when the townspeople go to bid on the "most beautiful" women of the town, they go down the line in "quality" until they reach those said to be

“deformed and crippled” (*ἀμόρφους καὶ ἐμπήρους*). As Herodotus relates, the rules of the auction would change for this group of women, and the men – who were usually poor peasants – would get paid money to marry the women.

I also examine the Labda narrative as a way to delve into how the children of a disabled woman might be perceived. I assert that perceptions of Labda as disabled fed into her son Cypselus’ reputation for being a twisted tyrant whose conduct often went against the grain of Greek conceptions of “natural order” (Herodotus 5.92a). As Labda was deemed “unnatural”, her son Cypselus and his descendants would perpetrate “unnatural” acts such as becoming a tyrant and committing murder, torture, and necrophilia. In this context, I argue that disabilities could be seen as inevitable curses that would be passed down from parent to child.

Related to these discussions of Labda and her kin, and the important role that her offspring play in her story, I also examine the situation of sterile women in ancient Greece, building upon scholarship such as Pomeroy’s *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (87) to argue that such women essentially would have been considered disabled due to gender roles emphasizing the need for women to bear children. I incorporate examples from Ancient Greek medical writings attributed to Hippocrates, such as his work *On Virgins* (466-470), to analyze the physical, psychological, and societal pressures and consequences faced by women with this type of “disability”, including connections between perceptions of “hysteria” and sterility. Considering the medical “treatments” available for sterility and hysteria in women, I show that many of these practices were physically and sexually abusive, again indicating the rampant devaluing and dehumanizing of women with disabilities in ancient Greek society.

Through such evidence I strive to illuminate the societal and psychological realities faced by ancient Greek women with disabilities, and I propose that the intersectionality between

history, women, and disabilities should be studied more extensively. Unfortunately, many of the same prejudicial ideas and systems of power remain relevant today: the casting aside of disabled women in various spheres of life, the exploitation of women who are receiving medical care, and the still-prevalent push towards reproductive futurism: the idea that everything people do, either in politics or society, ought to be propelled by a motivation to create children and provide for future generations.

Works Cited

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