

Christian Laes, C.F. Goodey, and M. Lynn Rose, eds., *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies a Capite ad Calcem*. Mnemosyne Supplement vol. 356. 2013. Leiden and Boston: Brill. xiii, 318.

Disabilities in the Roman World is an intellectually and morally challenging investigation of what constituted physical and mental disparity in Roman antiquity. As its editors point out, it “could be the very first book devoted exclusively to the subject of disability in the ancient Roman world” (p. 3). We should take this as a modest disclaimer, since they also claim to have gathered together “the few scholars in the world who deal with disabilities in Roman Antiquity” (p. vii). That in itself would be reason enough to welcome these twelve essays, were it not for the additional virtue which the collection has that each essay in its distinctive way requires the reader to re-evaluate her definition of disability within not only the context of ancient Rome but also that of contemporary society (hence the use of the preferred term ‘disparity’ to ‘disability’). Indeed one cannot read this book without being aware that it is fuelled by passion, not only to get the subject ‘out there’ but also to dispel egregious misconceptions, and, yes, even perhaps, in so doing to improve the lot of the disabled. And who can object? As Patricia Clark and Lynn Rose tell us bluntly “we... are activists and advocates, as well as allies of people with disabilities” (p. 47). The collection is also innovative in that it investigates not only bodily but also mental impairment, which till recently has been largely ignored in disability studies.

The challenge of comprehending physical and mental disparity in the context of Roman Antiquity is consistently emphasized. There is virtually no first-hand testimony. Though the authors reject strong constructionism — the belief that disability is ‘merely’ a social construct — they treat it necessarily as a concept “which may well have been constructed differently in different periods and cultures” (p. 5), and are careful to reject any false modern assumption of normalcy. They are alert to the obvious pitfalls of retrospective diagnosis based on modern terminology. In fact modern medical definitions are repeatedly insisted upon as being a hindrance, not a help. For instance, Graumann indicates (p. 202) that DSD (‘disorders of sex differentiation’) may have no equivalent in what went under the name of hermaphrodite in antiquity.

Goodey’s and Rose’s essay “Mental States: Bodily Dispositions and Table Manners: A Guide to Reading ‘Intellectual’ Disability from Homer to Late Antiquity”, which is especially polemical, raises questions about the difficulty, even the efficacy, of evaluating intellectual disability cross-culturally, particularly within a system like that established by the Greeks which sees the body and the mind as an inseparable entity. They also emphasize the degree to which intellectual disability was seen as dispositional rather than inherent, a function therefore of one’s ability to develop and train the mind. Clark’s and Rose’s “Psychiatric Disability and the Galenic Medical Matrix”, which also strikes a strong note of advocacy, analyzes six major types of mental aberrancy identified by Galen — phrenitis, mania, memory loss, melancholy, epilepsy, and senility, noting that none of them fit into modern nosological categories (p. 69).

Danielle Gourevitch's "Two Historical Case Studies of Acute Alcoholism in the Roman Empire" investigates the swift reaction of physicians to cases involving heavy drinking, and raises, though it does not fully address, the question whether alcoholism should be regarded as a disability. Lisa Trentin's "Exploring Visual Impairment in Ancient Rome" lays out the principal causes of visual impairment (disease, intentional and unintentional injury, and old age) and concludes, somewhat optimistically, that "the family and community at large would have provided a system of support whereby members of the lower classes could go about their daily business, albeit with some difficulty and physical vulnerability" (p. 110). Cornelia Horn's "A Nexus of Disability in Ancient Greek Miracle Stories: A Comparison of Accounts of Blindness from the Asklepieion in Epidauros and the Shrine of Thecla in Seleucia" situates healing, from the viewpoint of both pagan and Christian belief, in a transformative context of "gaining faith or overcoming skepticism" (p. 120). Christian Laes' "Silent History? Speech Impairment in Roman Antiquity" emphasizes the inadequacy of the ancient vocabulary for speech impairments and points out the lack of evidence from the ancient world on speech dysfluency, specifically stammering. Lutz Alexander Graumann's "Monstrous Births and Retrospective Diagnosis: The Case of Hermaphrodites in Antiquity" alerts us to the inappropriateness of forging any equivalence between hermaphrodite as they are presented in ancient texts and disorders of sex differentiation as biomedically defined today. Bert Gevaert's and Christian Laes' "What's in a Monster? Pliny the Elder, Teratology and Bodily Disability" investigates the miraculous and monstrous creatures outlined in Book 7 of Pliny's *Natural History*, to all of which, significantly, Pliny accorded the label 'human'. Évelyne Samama's "A King Walking with Pain? On the Textual and Iconographical Images of Philip II and Other Wounded Kings" argues that from the fourth century BCE onwards wounds acquired in battle came to be viewed in a positive light, thereby improving the popular perception of wounded soldiers and "elevating scars into badges of courage" (p. 245). Emma-Jayne Graham's "Disparate Lives of Disparate Deaths? Post-Mortem Treatments of the Body and the Articulation of Difference" claims on the basis of palaeopathology that those with pronounced skeletal abnormalities seemingly worked to the end of their lives and so "cannot be considered 'disabled' in terms of conditions that prevented work or excluded them from the socio-economic community", even though there is evidence that they were segregated in burial "maybe as a way of emphasizing or controlling their difference" (pp. 257, 264). Finally Alexandre Mitchell's "Disparate Bodies in Ancient Artefacts: The Function of Caricature and Pathological Grotesques among Roman Terracotta Figurines" examines the various functions that depictions of seriously deformed individuals served as art objects and analyzes the mixture of both observed and imaginary pathologies that they present.

Of the book's many assets, I want to single out four. First, this is not just a collection of essays. The contributors are in lively dialogue with one another, a quality which gives this volume an integrity that is unusual in collections of essays. Secondly, each of the contributors has done an excellent job in scouring the literature for all the data

pertinent to her topic of research. Though a strong political agenda permeates the collection, this has in no way undermined the primacy that is attached to the ancient evidence. This feature is as commendable as it is rare in a book that at times, as I have suggested, seeks to destabilize the reader's own preconceptions. For instance, Laes instances all the individuals "who might reasonably have experienced such speech impediments as stuttering or stammering" (p. 169) and Graumann lists all the 30 reported cases of 'hermaphrodites' in ancient literature. Third, close attention is paid to the nuance of terminology, as is appropriate in a book that self-consciously interrogates its own use of language. Fourth, the level of medical knowledge on the part of all the contributors is extremely impressive. This is a truly interdisciplinary undertaking that expects its readers to be as much at home in modern medicine as they are in the classics.

If I have one criticism of the collection it is that it consistently claims that the Roman world may have provided a more comfortable and/or accommodating environment for the disabled than is generally assumed. I would certainly need more evidence to ditch the "portrait of chronic misery for imperfect people in the Graeco-Roman world" (p. 22), which Goodey and Rose call into question, than is presented here. Graham is certainly right to remind us that the Roman world "was one that was far from completely able" and that it was "against this background that [the Romans] would have judged the bodies of others" (p. 258), but judgement is not the whole story, and the sufferings of all those who, to keep body and soul alive, must have performed physical tasks in conditions that are scarcely imaginable today should not be overlooked. That, to me, is a solid matter of fact, not one of "anachronistic conjecture and retrospective diagnosis", as is suggested (p. 22). Each essay is accompanied by its own extensive bibliography. There is an exhaustive Index Locorum and an admirable General Index. I noted only two typos. The editors deserve our warm gratitude for producing a book that is both scholarly and provocative, opinionated and incisive.

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