

(Dis)ability in Ancient Greek Literature

Disability and being disabled has been an aspect of the human experience from the very beginning. Yet, such aspects of the human experience are not often represented in literature, especially in ancient literature, despite the relatively large number of people with disabilities in society. This paper explores the portrayal of disability in ancient Greek literature as seen through the characters Oedipus, Tiresias, Philoctetes, Telephus, as well as the god Hephaestus. These particular figures from Greek mythology and literature were selected due to the prominence of the role that their disability plays in their respective narratives — especially in respect to how each of these figures came to be disabled in the first place. Furthermore, this paper will examine the parallels and similarities between Oedipus and Tiresias and Philoctetes and Telephus. The former pair both eventually becoming blind and involved with the politics of the city of Thebes while the latter both being soldiers in the Trojan War that suffer injuries to their lower extremities and being told they are instrumental to ending the war.

While these figures are diverse in their narratives they have two crucial aspects in common with each other: physical disability and being *apolis*. *Apolis* is literally to be without a polis, whether that be because of exile, by choice, or any number of reasons. While it is not the most widely used term in the Greek language, the word ‘apolis’ does appear several times in Greek literature, not just in drama but in other literary sources as well—such as historical sources like Herodotus. Literally it means to be without a polis and its most common use is to describe someone who is an outcast or exile, and this is how Sophocles utilizes this word. The state of being *apolis* is crucial to understanding physical disability because the role that society plays in disability can, and often is, just as important as the physical disability itself, since the polis

provides community and resources that would otherwise be unavailable to the individual.

By examining how each of these characters came to be disabled, as well as the similarities and differences between them, the role and effects their disabilities have on their narratives, this paper aims to illuminate ancient Greek attitudes towards disability and shed light on the lives of disabled people that lived in ancient Greece. One of the most important of these conclusions is that people living with disabilities in ancient Greece could, and were, still contributing and valued members of society. Both in spite—and because—of their disability.

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