Review Essay
Why does classical reception need disability studies?

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Many of the ableist tropes around disability and disabled people in the modern world find their antecedents in ancient mythology and its reception, but the seemingly ‘traditional’ nature of these harmful tropes and reflexes of storytelling is not established by accident or in the absence of readers. We argue here that classical reception needs to look to disability studies for a methodology that will allow the field to begin to theorize the role of the reader in the perpetuation of the ideology of ableism and ideas of bodily normativity. The field of classical reception studies engages in the process of investigating how the ‘traditional’ comes to be accepted as pre-existing; as such, it is vital that classical reception look to disability studies for the tools with which to lay bare the ways in which the apparatus of ableism comes to seem traditional. This article sets out some strategies for bringing classical reception and disability studies together with the aim of developing a more critical philology, an ethically-invested method for doing classical reception, and the theoretical and practical tools to create a more inclusive field. In short, this article makes the case for ‘cripping’ classical reception studies.

Introduction: what enables Oedipus to solve the riddle of the Sphinx?

When Oedipus correctly answers the riddle of the Sphinx — and in doing so, secures his place on the throne of Thebes — he shows a particular kind of ability, not evident in the responses of any of the Thebans who attempted to answer the riddle before him. Oedipus’ unique capacity to provide the solution which has long eluded the Thebans is emphasized by Apollodorus’ account of the story in his second-century AD Biblioteca. The riddle, in Apollodorus’ telling of the story, is posed as follows:

τί ἐστιν ὃ μίαν ἔχον φωνὴν τετράπουν καὶ δίπουν καὶ τρίπουν γίνεται;
(Apollodorus, Biblioteca 3.5.8)

What is that which has one voice and nevertheless is four-footed, two-footed, and three-footed?

For readers of this passage, another riddle asserts itself alongside this one: what is it about Oedipus that renders him capable of generating a solution that the troubled...
Thebans cannot? When Oedipus learns that Creon will give Laius’ throne to whoever can solve the riddle, he provides the solution as follows:

Οἰδίπους δὲ ἄκοιχας ἔλυσεν, εἰπὼν τὸ ἄινιμμα τὸ ὕπο τῆς Σφιγγός λεγόμενον ἀνθρώπον εἶναι γίνεσθαι γὰρ τετράπον βρέφος ὅτα τοῖς τέτταρισι ὁχύρωμον κόλλοις, τελειούμενον δὲ ὑπάους, γηρόντα δὲ τρίτην προσλαμβάνειν βάσιν τὸ βάκτρον. (Apollodorus, Biblioteca 3.5.8)

After he heard that, Oedipus solved it, saying that the Sphinx’s riddle speaks of ‘the human being’, because it is four-footed as an infant, carried on four limbs, but in adulthood it is two-footed, and then in old-age, it gains the staff as a third foot.

The riddle’s meaning finds itself explained by the body of the solver, and the solution gives us an insight into what it is that enables Oedipus to discover that the answer is anthropos, ‘the human being’, or ‘humanity’.

In contrast with the Thebans who have met the Sphinx and have unsuccessfully tried to answer the riddle before him, Oedipus’ embodied experiences set him apart as the solver of the riddle; he possesses the kind of situated knowledge that facilitates his conceptualization of humanity as a category of bodily instability. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue, ‘we must assume that his own disability served as an experiential source for this insight’ (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 61). Oedipus recognizes the ways in which the human body shapeshifts across different postural orientations because, as Mitchell and Snyder point out, his own unique body, resulting from his failed exposure as an infant, makes him the interpreter most suited to identifying the riddle’s answer.

The solver’s own identity as disabled is of course reaffirmed in the dual etymologies of his name played upon repeatedly in Sophocles’ Oedipus the King. Throughout the play, various characters (including Oedipus himself) pun on the οἶδα [oida] root in Oedipus’ name (Soph. OT 43, 397, 924–26), playing with the ironies it provokes around knowing and epistemology. Once Oedipus is confronted with the Messenger, who confirms his identity as the dual son and killer of Laius, it is the other popular etymology of his name that comes into focus (οἶδος [oidos], ‘swelling’ + πούς [pous], ‘foot’). Oedipus’ recognition of himself as ‘the swollen-footed one’ tips him over into absolute and irrevocable knowledge of his identity and its implications in the plague upon Thebes. His belated and devastating knowledge of himself comes about through the Messenger’s observation:

ὡςτ᾽ ὄνομάσης ἐκ τύχης ταύτης ὃς εἴ. (Soph. OT 1036)

Such that you were named from that fortune which is still yours.

Oedipus’ knowing and his physical difference simultaneously occupy the core of his own name, and this overabundance of meaning connects his disabled body with the different processes of knowledge-making required throughout the play.

When we look beyond Oedipus’ role as the riddle’s solver, and investigate the implications of the riddle’s solution, further questions arise: What does the riddle
(both its question and its answer) imply about the relationship between conceptions of humanity and disability? How is disability troped and figured through this riddle? How does the riddle open itself in varied ways to varied kinds of situated and embodied knowledges? Oedipus’ solution implies that disability is an inherent and fundamental aspect of humanity, and that the positioning of the abled body as ‘normal’ is a social construction. The two-legged human being — who uses only two limbs, with no devices or companions to walk through the world — might have been perceived as ‘normal’ to those Thebans who were unable to find the solution to the riddle; yet this mid-life stage of normate embodiment is in fact a minority experience within the spectrum of humanity, as Oedipus points out in his solution. More often than we are two-footed, we are three- or four-footed, the logic of the riddle suggests.

In Apollodorus, the different bodily manifestations of humanity are allotted specific time periods: the *anthropos* is four-footed when crawling in childhood, two-footed in mobile adulthood, and three-footed in old age, when the third foot of the body is figured prosthetically: a walking stick, or a mobility aid, which both the Sphinx and Oedipus rhetorically configure as a part or ‘foot’ of the human body. While Oedipus’ solution argues for the varied mobility of the human condition, it also emphasizes a normative order of embodied experience: disability may be fundamental to human existence, but it arises properly in the eras of childhood and old age — or so the Sphinx’s logic seems to imply. Oedipus’ solution does nothing to undermine the Sphinx’s assumption that embodiment follows a fixed trajectory, or that adulthood is definitively a ‘two-footed’ experience. Even as Oedipus uses his own knowledge of a body that does not conform to normate assumptions about human bodies, he overlooks human experiences of disability that do not conform to this teleological structure of the changing embodiment of ‘human’, which the Sphinx outlines for him in her riddle. This article takes up some of the questions raised by the Sphinx’s riddle and Oedipus’ response, and argues that disability studies offers modes of reading disability in classical (and post-classical) texts that can recognize, resist, and reconfigure ableist modes of reading and interpreting ancient myths.

Taking the methodologies employed by scholars in disability studies as our examples, we propose a mode of reading that draws attention to the language of the body and its ideological dimensions, in both ancient texts and their reception. Such a mode of reading would need to be alert, we argue, to the way that the construction of the ‘normal’ or the normate body — we use the term ‘normate body’ to mean ‘a body constructed as normal’ — has been an operation of structures of power that have shifted at different moments in history, and to the ways in which particular terms used in Greek have been translated in ideologically motivated ways. We offer here the case study of the translation of Hephaestus’ epic epithet, ἀμφίγυήεις (pronounced *amphigu-ë-eis*), which has been glossed as diversely as ‘of the two strong hands’, ‘lame’, ‘crippled’, ‘the ambidextrous one’, ‘curved in both directions’, and ‘curving both ways’. Towards the end of the essay, we look critically at tropes of physical difference that have been attributed to or perceived to originate in ancient myths and their reception. Taking our lead from scholars, performers, writers, and other activists for disability rights, justice, and...
liberation movements, we offer suggestions for critical scholarship and pedagogy that can facilitate an inclusive future for classical reception.

**Historicizing ability**

When the academic field of disability studies first began to establish itself as a discipline in the 1980s, scholarly discussions revolved around the differentiation of ‘impairment’ from ‘disability’. Ann Millett-Gallant and Elizabeth Howie distinguish these terms as follows:

Impairment is a term that refers to the specific corporeal (including both physical and psychological) ways in which a body might diverge from the so-called normal or average body in ways that create functional limitations. The term ‘impairment’ also serves as a reminder that more than other marginalized identities, disability is one that anyone may pass in and out of because of the relationship of impairment to accident or illness; . . .

The term ‘disability’ in this context refers to the social consequences of an impairment in relation not only to the body, but also to social constructions that result in limitations as well as a social and personal identity. (Millett-Gallant and Howie 2017: 2)

Rather than accepting disability as the necessary consequence of bodies that diverge from an imagined ‘norm’, scholars working in disability studies looked for new frameworks through which to understand the relationship between impairment and disability. This search for new ways of thinking enabled the shift from the dominant medical model to the social model. Whereas the medical model ‘situates disability exclusively in individual bodies and strives to cure them by particular treatment, isolating the patient as diseased or defective’ (Siebers 2006: 173), the social model draws attention to the way in which societies construct notions of ability and disability such that certain bodies are ideologically constituted as abled and disabled. As Edward Wheatley writes in his monograph on disability in medieval Europe, the social model demands redefinition of ‘able-bodied’ and ‘disabled’ in such a way that society can acknowledge and include the full spectrum of physical types. Disability is no longer individualized as a condition ‘belonging’ to a person but as one of a number of possible physical states in society. (Wheatley 2014: 6)

The process of distinguishing impairment from disability, and therefore drawing attention to the social construction of the normate and the disabled body, placed disability studies immediately into the position of confronting the marginalization of disabled people as ‘other’ to the imagined norm, much as queer studies and critical race studies had done for other (and intersecting) marginalized groups. The term ‘ableism’ emerged in activist and academic writing in the 1980s to designate the structural oppression of disabled people:

Disability studies has also coined the term ‘ableism’ to align the oppression of disabled people with that of other marginalized groups; ‘ableism’ strategically raises associations
with racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and so on, to draw attention to the way that dominant culture’s marginalization of otherness relates to disability. (Millett-Gallant and Howie 2017: 2)

Disability studies has emerged as a discipline focussed on examining the structures of power (and ableism) at play in established methodologies and epistemologies of scholarship. The social model is therefore most useful to the examples under discussion in this article specifically for its recognition of the way in which the ‘normal’ has always been a power-sensitive category.

While scholars have for some time now given their attention to disabled figures in ancient evidence, classicists have only recently begun to engage with the theoretical frameworks of disability studies. But the focus on disability as socially constructed — as an experience which arises when a body exists in an environment crafted so as to exclude it — issues an important invitation to Classics, and in particular to classical reception studies, which this article takes up. If ability and disability are social constructions not resulting exclusively from individual bodies, then they cannot be accepted as diachronic fixed categories: ability and disability must be historicized by both the classicist and the classical reception scholar. The norm against which disabled bodies have traditionally been measured is, as disability studies scholar Lennard Davis puts it, not a self-evident and ancient idea, but rather the product of constructed social values:

A common assumption would be that some concept of the norm must have always existed. After all, people seem to have an inherent desire to compare themselves to others. But the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society. (Davis 2006: 3)

Though the concept of an ideal body was known to philosophers such as Aristotle, Davis observes that words which denote the concept of ‘normaley’ (‘normal’, ‘normality’, ‘norm’, ‘average’, ‘abnormal’, etc.) in English emerged as a lexicographical trend for the first time in the nineteenth century, when industrialization and its accompanying ideologies began to replace the seventeenth century concept of the ‘ideal’ with the ‘normal’ (Davis 2006: 4). If, for the classicist, the goal has been to historicize the production of bodily meanings in the ancient world, and to ask what ‘certain kind of society’ fifth-century Athens, for instance, must have been in order to construct the dis/abled body in a particular kind of way, then the challenge raised by disability studies for the classical reception scholar is obvious. Those who ‘read’

1 Garland (1995), Rose (2003), Laes (2017), and Laes, Goodey, and Rose (2018) among others, have considered disability in texts and other kinds of evidence from the ancient world. ‘Classics and Disability Studies’ was also the subject of Ellen Adams’ 2018 Wellcome Trust funded project, which funded three related events, including a conference called ‘The forgotten other: disability studies and the classical body’, held at King’s College London and co-organized with Emma-Jayne Graham.
the bodies of disabled characters in Greek tragedy, for instance, are not only the fifth-century audiences (or those present at fourth-century revivals), but the infinite variety of readers, performers, audiences, translators, receivers, and others influenced by the narratives and the assumptions around disability contained within them. Carol Thomas describes the challenge for disability studies as follows:

Disability now resided in a nexus of social relationships connecting those socially identified as impaired and those deemed non-impaired or ‘normal’, relationships that worked to exclude and disadvantage the former while promoting the relative inclusion and privileging of the latter. The new challenge was to: i) describe this nexus of social relationships, that is, to make clear the manifestations of disability in the social world (in organisations, systems, policies, practices, ideologies and discourses) and ii) to explain it, by employing theoretical paradigms that generate ways of understanding what gives form to and sustains these relationships. (Thomas 2004: 33)

Our aim here is not so much the task of the disability-studies-influenced ancient historian, to describe the nexus of social relationships that construct the ‘physically disabled’ in the ancient world. Instead, we aim to dissect the ways in which exclusionary narratives (‘legal, medical, political, cultural and literary’ as Garland-Thomson 1997: 6, points out) both ancient and modern have been used to construct disability in antiquity, and have made their way into assumptions made about disability (both represented in literary material and in real life) in the modern world, via the translation and reception of ancient texts.

Critical philology

In the translator’s note to her 2018 translation of Homer’s Odyssey, Emily Wilson invites her readers to consider the ways in which translators of the Homeric epics have imported misogynistic biases into the words they choose to render descriptions of Homeric women such as Helen and Penelope. She distinguishes her own practice as a translator as a mediator not only between languages and texts, but across cultural values and diverse manifestations of interacting ideologies:

I try to avoid importing contemporary types of sexism into this ancient poem, instead shining a clear light on the particular forms of sexism and patriarchy that do exist in the text . . . . Many contemporary translators render Helen’s ‘dog-face’ as if it were equivalent to ‘shameless Helen’ (or ‘Helen the bitch’). I have kept the metaphor (‘hounded’), and have also made sure that my Helen, like that of the original, refrains from blaming herself for what men do in her name. (Wilson 2018: 89)

As Wilson clarifies her own methodology, she simultaneously poses a task to present and future translators. She draws readers’ attention to the critical and political significance of translinguistic biases, which circulate through translations and receptions of ancient Greek and Roman literary works. In an attempt to complement Wilson’s approach to translation, we outline here a path for future classical reception
scholarship that unpicks the histories of language, translation, and ideology that accompany various disabled figures from the ancient world. As classical reception scholars collectively begin to read what is lost and gained in translated literary depictions of figures like Hephaestus or Oedipus — while explicitly employing a mode of reading that is critical of ableist ideologies (both modern and ancient) — our field can also gain a deeper familiarity with the nuances of disability as a socially constructed and rhetorical phenomenon, one which is integral to many central scholarly questions about the ancient past.

Wilson’s comments on the translation of gendered terms in the *Odyssey* have obvious analogues for scholars working on the connection between translation and ideology in the reception of texts about disabled characters from the ancient world. Despite its critical focus on refraining from ‘importing contemporary types of sexism’, Wilson’s translation does not extend this critical philology to terms used to denote disability. The term ἀποφάλλος, which *LSJ* defines as ‘empty, vain, idle’, appears in Wilson’s translation of *Odyssey* 8.176-77 as ‘crippled’:

\[\text{ὡς καὶ σοι εἴδος μὲν ἄριστετές, οὐδὲ κεν ἄλλως οὐδὲ θέος τεῦχει, νόσον δ’ ἀποφάλλος ἐσσι.} \]

Like you — you look impressive, and a god could not improve your body. But your mind is crippled. (Hom. Od. 8.176–77)

The Greek word itself does not explicitly connotate disability, and yet the semantic ambiguity in the term is resolved with stigmatizing metaphors in this English translation. Wilson here allows disability to function as a metaphor for the emptiness, vanity, or idleness that define the Greek word. The Homeric use of the adjective ἀποφάλλος lacks clear or obvious semantic value for philologists and translators, as J. B. Hainsworth has noted in his commentary on Book 5 the *Odyssey*:

[5.182. ἀποφάλλω: an Odyssean word (here and viii 177, xi 249, xiv 212) of uncertain sense, glossed by ἅπασιδεντος in scholl., and by ἄνεμόλλος, μάταοις in the Lexica. The etymologists fall back on the Hesychian gloss ἄποσφεῖν [sic]— ἄπαταν, taking the -ο- as an Aeolism. (Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth, 1988 ad 5.182)](https://academic.oup.com/crj/article/12/4/502/5910322)

Moments of semantic uncertainty in Homer seem to serve as frequent repositories for the ideological assumptions of individual translators, situated as they (and we) are in their own knowledges, biases and cultural impressions: this uncertain word, ἀποφάλλος, whose core meaning seems to refer to ‘emptiness’, comes into Wilson’s English as ‘crippled’. ‘Crippled’, here is not only a slur but a metaphor that is selected to capture the blankness of the mind of Odysseus’ Phaeacian interlocutor — with the accidental, perhaps, but no less loaded effect of ‘importing contemporary types of’ ableism into the linguistic texture of translations of Homer.

Wilson’s translation of ἀποφάλλος is a small example of a larger pattern of ambiguous Homeric vocabulary arriving in English translations encoded with ableist assumptions. An even more striking example is the term ὑμφιγυήεις, a common
epithet used of the disabled god Hephaestus, which appears a total of eight times in Homer’s *Iliad*, and twice in the *Odyssey*. Most English language translators offer a strange smattering of inconsistent English words that add both obscurity and varied stigmatization to the representation of Hephaestus. Both within and beyond Homer’s representations of the disabled god, Hephaestus’ disability is shown to be essential to the complex expression of his particular divinity, as well as his social and political position within the cosmos. Translators and scholars have generally understood this word (ἀμφιγυήεις) as an essential part of the expression of Hephaestus’ embodiment. Hephaestus’ epithets and their English translation history reveal the extent to which modern ideological understandings of physical disability have asserted themselves into the history of classical scholarship and translation, in ways that both obscure and draw attention to Homer’s representation of Hephaestus as a disabled god.

The three most frequent epithets that accompany Hephaestus in archaic Greek poetry are περικλυτός (periklutos, ‘famous, renowned’, or simply κλυτός, klutos), κλυτοτέχνης (klutotechnēs, ‘famed for his art’), and ἄμφιγυήεις, whose meaning is much harder to provide in a parenthetical gloss. The epithet ἄμφιγυήεις has been rendered with extreme variation by different English language translators, in large part due to the obscurity of its meaning to both ancient and modern scholars of Homeric Greek. In his 1956 study of the word’s meaning in Homer, Louis Deroy suggests that the translation of ἄμφιγυήεις as ‘lame’ has emerged from a collective chain of faulty scholarly assumptions that Hephaestus’ lameness is epithetically definitive of his character, and of this adjective’s meaning:

Il est évident que la notion précautionnable d’un Héphaistos boiteux a influencé l’interprétation ancienne du mot, dans lequel on reconnaissait sans peine un second terme proche de γυιός et de γυήτης ‘estropié, boiteux’. (Deroy 1956: 129)

It is obvious that the preconceived notion of a lame Hephaestus influenced the ancient interpretation of the word, in which a second term close to γυιός and γυήτης ‘crippled, lame’ was recognized without difficulty.

Writing decades before the publication of much of the theoretical work that informs our own approach here, and without intentionally engaging in the politics of disability terminology, Deroy pushes (French-reading) scholars to examine the way in which those misleading and stigmatizing scholarly filters have obscured collective access to Homeric language. Deroy ultimately argues that the word’s γυ- root, in its association with ‘limbs’ and with the adjectives γυιός and γυήτης, has been misunderstood (this point receives additional support in Bechtel’s (1914) *Lexilogus* 40). Instead of depicting some form of mobility impairment, the word’s use, roots, and formation all direct Deroy to offer a revised gloss of ἄμφιγυήεις, where it is

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2 See Deroy (1956: 131), on γυάλας, γυέλιον, γύης, γυιός, γυίον, γυίω, γυήτης, γύαια (τά).
understood as an alternative form of the word ἄμφιγυος, an epithet applied in Homer to spears.3

Je crois donc qu’ἄμφιγυος signifiait ‘orienté dans deux directions opposées, dirigé en même temps vers la gauche et vers la droite, ou vers l’avant et vers l’arrière’. Cette signification convient aussi bien à la lance à deux pointes qu’au combattant incertain devant l’issue de la lutte.

J’en reviens ainsi au mot qui fait l’objet de cette note, ἄμφιγυήεις. Je crois avoir réuni tous les éléments nécessaires pour avancer, avec assez de vraisemblance, la traduction décomposante que voici: ‘doué (-εις) d’une direction (-γύη-) double et divergente (ἄμφη-)’. Ainsi donc, au témoignage de la linguistique, Homère aurait appliqué à Héphaistos une épithète savante, tirée d’on ne sait quel répertoire théologique, et qui nous apprend que ce dieu avait la réputation de pouvoir se déplacer non seulement en avant comme tout le monde, mais aussi, fort étonnamment, en sens inverse, vers l’arrière. (Deroy 1956: 134)

I believe therefore that ἄμφιγυος meant ‘oriented in two opposed directions, directed at the same time to the left and to the right, or forward and backward.’ This meaning is just as appropriate for a spear with two points as for a fighter, ignorant of the outcome of the fight.

So I come back also to the word that is the subject of this note, ἄμφιγυήεις. I believe I have gathered all the elements necessary to put forward, with enough likelihood, the deconstructed translation as follows: ‘endowed (-εις) with a direction (-γύη-) double and divergent (ἄμφη-)’. Thus, according to linguistics, Homer would have applied to Hephæstus a learned epithet, taken from who knows what theological repertoire, and which teaches us that this god had the reputation of being able to move not only forwards like everyone else, but also, most surprisingly, in reverse, backwards.

Deroy (1956: 132–4). The most recent etymological lexicon of Greek, published in 2010 by Brill, gives no entry for Ἄμφιγυήεις, but does feature the term ἄμφιγυος, a word that also appears as a Homeric epithet. Spelled ἄμφιγυος, this epithet but is consistently attached to the word for ‘spear’ (ἔγχος), and in this spelling and application, it is glossed by LSJ as meaning, ‘with a limb at each end, double-pointed, or (γύης) bending both ways, elastic, II.13.147; Od.24.527; ἅ. δοῦρασιν’ A.R.3.135; prob. (from γυῖον) stout rivals, S.Tr.504(lyr.’ (LSJ s.v. ἄμφιγυος). The Brill entry for ἄμφιγυος points the reader to the entry for its core component, γύης, -ου [m.], (gui-ēs, ou), which is defined as ‘the curved piece of wood in a plough’ (p. 290). The entry for γύης also features the form ἄμφιγυος, which is used in the Iliad to describe lances and javelins, and is glossed as “with a limb at each end?” (Trumpy 1950: 59). In this entry, it is noted that the form attached to Hephæstus is another iteration of ἄμφιγυος, one that is metrically lengthened, and glossed thus as ‘crippled on both sides’ (?).’ On the etymology of ἄμφιφυήεις, Beekes (2010) notes that the word ‘belongs to a difficult complex’ (p. 290); Hainsworth remarks that ‘the sense of this famous epithet is still disputed’ (Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth 1998 ad 8.300). This difficulty weighs heavily on the history of English language translations of Hephæstean epithets. The abundance of question marks printed in the Brill entry indicate the general scholarly confusion provoked by the term.
After surprising himself with the conclusion that Hephaestus’ epithet might signify such a flexible mode of motility, Deroy notes that his translation of ἀμφιγυήεις finds support in Marie Delcourt’s (1957) understanding of Hephaestus as a magician, and one whose legs are often positioned (on Attic vases) as faced in opposite directions. Deroy’s gloss of ἀμφιγυήεις also finds support in the work of disability studies scholar Jay Dolmage, who has written of Hephaestus:

Having feet that face away from one another does not necessarily entail ‘impairment’—it means he can move from side to side more quickly. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, in Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society, write that Hephaestus was symbolized by the crab and that his side-to-side movement had symbolic value. He was seen as having a ‘power […] emphasized by his distinctive character of being endowed with a double and divergent orientation . . . . His ‘disability’ was (and can again be) seen as that which allowed him to ‘dominate shifting, fluid powers such as fire and wind’ in his work in the forge . . . Like a crab, Hephaestus’ symbolic movement is not straightforward. (Dolmage 2006: 120–21)

Here we find an example of a scholar outside of the discipline of Classics who makes use of scholarly insights about Hephaestus, in a way that allows him to access the meanings of ἀμφιγυήεις that have been so obscured by English translations of the term.

Despite the fact that Deroy’s philological intervention was published in 1956; despite the fact that additional discussion of the word’s ambiguities appeared in 1988 in Heubeck (Heubeck and Hoesktra 1989), West, and Hainsworth’s commentary on the Odyssey; and despite the collective efforts of both classicists and disability studies scholars to explore how Hephaestus’ mobility interacts with his Homeric characterization, the word ἀμφιγυήεις still seems to present interpretive challenges in the recent history of English translations of the Iliad, probably as a consequence of the lexicons’ consistently inadequate glosses of the term. The ninth and most recent edition of H.G. Liddell and R. Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon (LSJ), published in 1996, prints a very brief entry for the epithet: ‘Ἀμφιγυήεις, ὁ, epith. of Hephaestus, with both feet crooked, lame. Il. 1.607 etc.’ (s.v. ἀμφιγυήεις). This word is given again in the LSJ supplement, with the following entry: ‘Ἀμφιγυήεις, for pres. def. read “with bent legs, bandy’” (s.v. ἀμφιγυήεις). If our discipline insists, in its foundational resources, upon anachronistic and misleading glosses (such as ‘lame’) for pivotal linguistic depictions of ancient bodies and people, then we will need a new mode of philology that looks at the intersections between linguistic history and histories of embodiment and disability, in order to avoid the perpetuation of ableist assumptions about ancient texts.

The epithet ἀμφιγυήεις first accompanies Hephaestus in Homer’s Iliad when the gods are returning from divine assembly and feasting to their own homes (Hom. Il. 1.607). Hephaestus’ role in this book is one of immense scholarly interest due to his intervention between his quarrelling parents and his provocation of divine laughter,
when he persuades Hera to yield to Zeus and serves as her cupbearer. The epithet first appears not in the comic scene of Hephaestus’ intervention, but after the gods depart for their Hephaestus-built homes:

οἱ μὲν κακκείοντες ἔβαν οἶκον δὲ ἔκαστος, ἡχὶ ἐκάστῳ δόμια περικλυτὸς ἀμφιγυήεις Ἡφαιστος ποίησεν ἱδώρησι πραπίδεσσι. (Hom. Il. 1.606-08)

They went to go lie down, each of them to their dwelling, where the renowned amphi-gu-eis Hephaestus Built for each god a home, with his skillful thinking.

In his translation for the Loeb Classical Library in 1924, Augustus Taber Murray translates this adjective as ‘limping’, apparently taking the word’s components of ‘on both sides’ and ‘limbs’ to refer to Hephaestus’ mobility in his lower limbs. The most recent English language translator of the Iliad, Caroline Alexander, uses the archaic English expression ‘crook-legged’, here and for all of her translations of ἀμφιγυήεις. Alexander’s translation emphasizes the visual bending in Hephaestus’ legs, and also follows the verbal patterning of ‘swift-footed’, a tropic translation of Achilles’ foot-related epithets (i.e., for Achilles, ποδαρκής, πόδας ὦκός, ποδώκης; also relevant is ‘silver-footed [ἄργυρόπεζα] Thetis’) used by many English translators. Unlike Murray and Alexander, who focus on Hephaestus’ feet, Richmond Lattimore shifts the semantic emphasis to Hephaestus’ upper body, and emphasizes the strength in both of the god’s (upper) limbs, when he translates ἀμφιγυήεις as ‘strong-handed’. Robert Fagles’ translation of ἀμφιγυήεις — ‘the ... crippled Smith — emphasises the metallurgical productivity of Hephaestus’ hands as well as the physical and/or mobility disability in his lower body. Across each of these varied translations, our sense of Hephaestus is obscured by the translators’ own biases and expectations about what aspect of Hephaestus’ embodiment might be most relevant to the passage at hand.

While Hephaestus is first described this way by the voice of the narrator in Book 1, Hera also describes her son Hephaestus with the word ἀμφιγυήεις at Iliad 14.239. In an attempt to distract Zeus’ attention from the war, Hera enlists the help of a reluctant Hypnos (Sleep) in her plan, and she sweetens her appeal to Hypnos by offering him comfortable and beautiful furniture, crafted by Hephaestus amphi-gu-ε-eis:

κοίμησόν μοι Ζηνός ὑπ᾽ ὀφρύσιν δοσε φαεινῷ αὐτίκ’ ἐπεὶ κεν ἐγώ παραλέξομαι ἐν φιλότητι. δῶρα δὲ τοι δόσω καλὸν θρόνον ἀφθινὸν αἰεὶ χρύσεον. Ἡφαιστος δὲ κ’ ἐμὸς πᾶξ ἀμφιγυήεις τεῦξει ἀσκήσας, ὑπὸ δὲ θρήνου ποσὶν ἴσει, τῷ κεν ἐπισχοίης λιπαροὺς πόδας εἰλαπτινόσων. (Hom. Il. 14.236-41)

4 See for instance Braswell (1982), Brockliss (2019) Brown (1989), Burkert (2009), Collobert (2000), Halliwell (2008: 51–99), and Halliwell (2017).
Do me a favor: Lull to sleep the two shining eyes of Zeus, below the brows, as soon as I lay myself beside him in love. And you know, I’ll give you gifts: a beautiful throne, eternally imperishable, and made of gold. See, Hephaestus, my son, *amphig-ι-eis*, will elaborately craft it, and below it he will place a footstool for your feet, on which you may rest your oily feet when you are revelling.

Hera here emphasizes both the marvellous handcrafting of the throne as well as the footstool on which Hypnos may rest his oily feet (ὑπὸ δὲ θρήνου ποσίν ἥσει, 14.240). Once again, Hephaestus’ identity is invoked in the context of the leisurely domestic environments that he builds for the physical comfort of the divine community. Although epithets are used for both metrical and semantic purpose, it is striking that ἀμφιγυήεις is used again in a setting that emphasizes Hephaestus’ technical capacity to provide decadent comfort for the divine community. Hypnos’ feet are invoked again and again (θρήνοι . . ποσίν . . ἀπαροῦς πόδας, 14.240-41), in a way that draws attention to Hephaestus’ production of comfortable and beautiful environments for divine bodies. This time, ὀμφατική is rendered by the same group of English language translators in the following ways: ‘of the two strong arms’ (Murray), ‘he of the strong arms’ (Lattimore), ‘the burly crippled Smith’ (Fagles, of *Il*. 14.239), and ‘crook-legged’ (again, Alexander).

We see that Murray, the translator of the most recent (1924) Loeb edition of the *Iliad*, translates the epithet as both ‘of the two lame legs’ and ‘of the two strong arms’ in these two different examples (Murray 1924: 1.607, 14.239). Lattimore consistently renders ὀμφατική as ‘strong-handed’/-armed’ (Lattimore 1951: 1.607, 18.383), and ‘of the (two) strong arms’ (Lattimore 1951: 14.239, 18.393, 462, 587, 590, 614), while he also adds the word ‘smith’ to five out of six of the uses of ὀμφατική given in Book 18 (when Hephaestus constructs Achilles’ armor). Stanley Lombardo imports the words ‘crippled’ and ‘smith’ into his translations of ὀμφατική (and oddly adds the word ‘burly’ in 14.239, ‘the burly crippled Smith’). Lombardo’s translations of ὀμφατική are perhaps the most erratic of all the twentieth and twenty-first century translators considered here: we find variants as wide-ranging as ‘burly blacksmith with the soul of an artist’ (1.607); ‘strong-armed’ (14.239), no translation given for the word’s use at 18.383, ‘smith’ (18.393, 462) and ‘the lame god’ (18.587, 590, 614). These semantic inconsistencies in the English translations of Hephaestus’ physical features in Greek epic provide meaningful insights into the ways in which future studies of Homeric vocabulary can benefit from the work of disability studies scholars and activists, in order to attend to the ways in which linguistic and ideological assumptions merge in long histories of translation and reception.

The term ὀμφατική is of course not the only word used of Hephaestus’ body; part of the way that the term tends to accrue meaning its English-language translations is by means of conceptual transference from some of Hephaestus’ other descriptors of disability. Elsewhere, Homer also uses the terms ἔρρων (‘moving slowly’, *Il*. 18.421), ἣπεδανός (‘weak’, ‘halting’, *Od*. 8.311), κνήμαι ἄραια (‘thin
shins’, *Iliad* 18.411, 20.37), κυλλοποδίων (‘clubfoot’, *Iliad* 18.371, 20.270, 21.331), χωλός/χωλεύων (‘limping’, *Iliad* 18.397, 18.417, 20.37; *Odyssey* 8.308, 8.332), marking out Hephaestus’ physical difference from an imagined normate body (we will not discuss these further terms here for reasons of space). But an examination of the translation history of ἀμφιγυήεις makes clear that these popular translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* all carry within them ideological impressions about Hephaestus’ disability. If translations continue to invest Hephaestus’ disability with the language of lack, or deficiency relative to an imagined normate body, then these impressions will continue to circulate within and beyond the scholarly conversation, until we begin to make use of a more critical philology. What is at stake is not so much the translation of a single word, ἀμφιγυήεις, to indicate themes of disability and mobility — although the word’s etymological roots seem not to imply a mobility impairment or disability, as Deroy has shown. Instead, our more urgent concern lies with the ways in which English language translators have assumed that Hephaestus’ disability is both the most definitive and a necessarily socially stigmatized aspect of Hephaestus’ Homeric identity.

Even more concerning than the circulation and impact of these individual translators’ depictions of Hephaestus’ disability only as a lack or a deficiency, are the ways in which the foundational tools of our discipline (our lexicons and dictionaries) have centred and perpetuated ableist misinterpretations of ancient evidence. Here, we aim to open the floodgates for a critical philology that takes the theoretical and practical insights of disability studies — with its detailed attention to the historical, social, and ideological nuances in languages of the body — into the field of classical philology. What new insights will we gain from an approach to philology that is informed by a critical awareness of the ways in which the body’s meanings are socially and historically constituted through language itself?

**Narratives of ableism and classical reception**

If, as we have seen, in translating disabled bodies from ancient texts, translators make a choice to render the bodily difference they encounter in language that is invested with ideology, then this ought to issue a warning even more strongly to the student of classical reception studies. When modern readers encounter disabled characters in ancient texts, these characters are not proxies for disabled people in real life in the ancient world, as Martha Rose has pointed out in her analysis of the differences between the historical evidence for blind people in the ancient world and narratives concerning blind characters in ancient literature:

> Stories about ordinary people with vision gradually fading from cataracts are not the stuff of legend. Similarly, the fact that a blind person can live an ordinary life by relying

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5 For a discussion of the Greek vocabulary that accompanies Hephaestus, see Brennan (2016: Appendix 2 (178–79)); for a broader discussion of Greek terms of disability, see Samama (2017).
on senses other than sight is not particularly interesting: divine compensation such as the gift of extraordinary hearing makes a more durable tale. Some blind people were venerated; some were castigated; most went about their business, albeit with more difficulty and physical vulnerability than a sighted person, and are lost from the record. (Rose 2003: 80)

In ancient literature, impairment is not simply a lived manifestation of bodily difference, or disability simply the social consequences of an impairment in relation to social constructions and a hostile environment; rather, it is mythologized and exploited in order to create meaning. This habit of making meaning out of (or troping) disability in ancient texts matters because the myths of disability for which it is responsible continue to operate in the modern world — not only in post-classical literature, but in real-life societal attitudes towards disabled people.

Mitchell and Snyder refer to this process of making meaning out of bodily difference for the purpose of narrative as ‘narrative prosthesis’, a phrase which is meant to indicate that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight. Bodies show up as dynamic entities that resist or refuse the cultural scripts assigned to them . . . we want to demonstrate that the disabled body represents a potent symbolic site of literary investment. (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 49)

In ancient literature we see narrative prosthesis in action, both modelled by ancient characters in their ‘readings’ of the bodies of disabled characters so as to construct ‘meaning’ in these characters’ physical differences from an imagined normate body, and in our own readings. Examples of characters reading the physical differences of others for meaning abound in ancient literature, perhaps most obviously in tragedy where it is commonplace for the chorus (most frequently, though they are far from alone as the agents of narrative prosthesis) to explain a disabled character’s place in a narrative by reading their body.

In Sophocles’ Oedipus at Colonus, the Chorus use the blinded Oedipus’ disabled body to make both a moral and a narrative assumption about him. On their entrance, the Chorus note immediately that they do not know who Oedipus (who has just rushed to hide himself in the grove nearby) is, but seek visual access to his body in order to find out. Their first words on entering are ὅρα. τίς ἄρ’ ἦν; (‘Look! Who is

6 ‘Narrative prosthesis’ draws attention to the ways in which readers and writers have positioned disability as something that indicates meaning, or invites contextualisation within a particular narrative. In this sense it is similar to Ato Quayson’s (2007) ‘aesthetic nervousness’, which calls for attention to be paid to the ways in which readers’ expectations of disabled characters are played on in the artistic representation of them. Both models of troping disability underline the ways in which readers attribute meaning to bodily difference, but ‘narrative prosthesis’ will better suit examination within classical reception studies specifically because it refers to a mode of reading rather than a particular set of culturally-influenced expectations.
he?’, 117), and as soon as they have seen him, they make a formulaic pronouncement about his physical form, calling him δεινὸς μὲν ὄραν (‘terrible to look at’, 141). The Chorus remain unsure as to whom they are speaking, however, until he informs them of his blindness. In fact, what Oedipus does here is to call attention to the physical manifestation of his disability and the fact that he requires a guide to navigate the hostile environment of the grove at Colonus (146–8). Once the physical manifestation of his disability becomes apparent to them, however, the Chorus immediately situate Oedipus and his body within a narrative, pronouncing:

ἐδώ καὶ ἔδωκαν ὁμομάτων ἀρα καὶ ἱσθα φυτάλμιος; δυσαίων μακραίοιν θ’, ὅσ’ ἐπεικάσαι. ἄλλα’ οὐ μάν ἐν γ’ ἐμοὶ προσθήσαις τάσδ’ ἄρας.

‘Ah! Have you been blind ever since you were born? You have had a sad life and a long one, it would seem! But you shall not bring down these curses upon me.’ (Soph. OC 150–53)

The Chorus of the Oedipus at Colonus employ what Mitchell and Snyder refer to as ‘narrative prosthesis’ in order to read a narrative into the accommodations that Oedipus requires because he is unable to navigate the grove alone. They imagine a narrative history, presuming to be able to ascertain from his physical difference what his life has been like (that is, sad and long), and inferring a crime that Oedipus has committed in the past, the ritual pollution of which he risks passing on to them in the present in the form of a curse.

In these assumptions, the Chorus assume the role of readers of ancient literature and make explicit the process of ‘narrative prosthesis’, which is implicit in all myths featuring disabled characters in ancient literature. In the case of blind characters, the tropes of blindness are readily apparent in ancient myth: blindness can be a punishment (e.g. Tiresias, Oedipus, Polymestor, Lykourgos), and it can be associated with a skill given in recompense (usually prophetic vision or ‘second sight’ e.g. Tiresias, but also poetry, e.g. Thamyris and Homer). These two narrative tropes — a. that disability indicates something negative about a character, and b. that disability is accompanied by some kind of superhuman ability given in recompense — are not limited to blind characters in texts from the ancient world, but are part of the way that ableist narratives reliant on ‘narrative prosthesis’ in ancient myths code contemporary narratives about disabled characters, as well as assumptions about and within real-life experience.7 That ‘narrative prosthesis’ had a role to play in real-life assumptions about disabled people in the ancient world is apparent from Aristotle’s comment in

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7 In a discussion of the portrayal of disability in the Homeric poems, Brockliss (2019) points out the ways in which permanently disabled individuals, like Hephaestus and Thersites, are granted ‘special status’ as a result of ‘special abilities which win the praise of others’ (4). Brockliss also details the ways in which these disabled individuals are
the *Eudemian Ethics* that ‘the blind remember better’ (οἱ τυφλοὶ μνημονεύουσι μᾶλλον, 1248 b). Indeed, the danger of ‘narrative prosthesis’ and these two resulting myths of disability is their enduring presence not only in literary and fictional sources, but in assumptions around disability in real life — as we will see.

The trope of the disabled villain is ubiquitous in popular culture. Think, for instance, of characters like Captain Hook, Shakespeare’s Richard III, Batman’s The Joker, Wonder Woman’s Dr Poison, or *Friday the 13th*’s Jason Vorhees. This ubiquity results in part from the way in which disability comes to be recognized as an obvious physical manifestation of punishment for immoral behaviour in ancient texts. In one example, Callimachus’ *Hymn* 5, punishment is the direct cause of disability in the description of Tiresias’ blinding by the goddess Athena, who reports to Tiresias’ mother that blindness is a lesser punishment for her son than death. Elsewhere, disablement and disability provide the motivation for the punishment of Polyphemus in Homer’s *Odyssey* 9 as well as the punishing social abandonment enacted upon wounded hero Philoctetes in Sophocles’ play of the same name. The positioning of disability as a necessary consequence of (and punishment for) immoral behaviour and transgression in ancient literature becomes, in early religious texts, the implication that disabled people (in real life) must necessarily be villainous: their disability is taken as physical proof of a previous sin. In medieval Christianity, the understanding of disability as a manifestation of an assumed sin was made apparent to those present at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, codifying the dominant interpretations of Biblical representations of disability:

> Since bodily infirmity is sometimes caused by sin, the Lord saying to the sick man whom he had healed ‘Go and sin no more, lest some worse thing happen to thee’ (John 5:14), we declare in the present decree and strictly command that when physicians of the body are called to the bedside of the sick, before all else they admonish them to call for the physician of souls, so that after spiritual health has been restored to them, the application of bodily medicine may be of greater benefit, for the cause being removed, the effect will pass away. (cited in Numbers and Amundsen 1986: 88–89)

Here the Fourth Lateran Council does not question the sinfulness of the imagined disabled people for whom it is legislating, because it is simply taken for granted by this particular religious model of disability that the presence of disability implies immorality and sin. Although the formation of this trope is closely connected with the history of early Christianity, the idea that disability implies something about a disabled person’s (im-)morality is far from a medieval relic. In ‘Crip Lineages, Crip Futures: A Conversation with Stacey Milbern’, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha records Milbern’s experiences of ableism in spiritual community that draw directly upon religious models of disability:

> excluded from the linguistic and social intimacy afforded to abled characters in the poems.
I grew up evangelical Christian in the American South... It really impacted my sense of self to hear that I was broken and unlovable by God because I was disabled and, then later, queer. Some people legit thought I was disabled because of some sin my mom must have done. I stopped being the same kind of Christian as my parents when church bullies told me I hadn’t been healed by god yet because I ‘didn’t believe enough.’ We were all thirteen years old. (Stacey Milbern, quoted in Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice 2018: 250–51).

Milbern’s story intersects crucially with broader social experiences of disability, within and beyond the frameworks of American religious and spiritual experience. In the UK alone, for example, the public’s perception of disability benefit fraud is thirty-four times higher than official accounts: according to research carried out by the charity Disability Rights UK, the public estimate that 23% of benefit claims are fraudulent, when in fact only 0.7% are found by the Department for Work and Pensions to be so.

Although the troping of the disabled character as superhuman or the beneficiary of some kind of special ability or ‘superpower’ may seem at first glance to be less malicious than the association of disabled characters with villainousness or criminality, it is nonetheless a mode of dehumanizing the disabled character. As Tobin Siebers explains:

Many representations of people with disabilities, however, use narrative structures that masquerade disability to benefit the able-bodied public and to reinforce the ideology of ability. Human-interest stories display voyeuristically the physical and mental disability of their heroes, making the defect emphatically present, often exaggerating it, and then wiping it away by reporting how it has been overcome, how the heroes are ‘normal’ despite the powerful odds against them. In other words, the hero is simultaneously and incoherently – ‘cripple’ and ‘supercripple’. This image of disability belongs to the masquerade because it serves a larger ideology requiring the exaggeration of disability, though here it is for the benefit of the nondisabled audience, not the disabled heroes themselves, and this fact makes all the difference. (Siebers 2011: 111)

The second sight that Tiresias receives in exchange for his blindness does not restore his physical sight, but it does function as a kind of ‘cure’ in the sense that it allows the character to function as if he were sighted — and even to surpass in his perception the sighted characters with whom he shares the stage. In Greek tragedy, the ‘supercripple’ trope not only augments the disabled characters’ abilities and bodies beyond those of abled characters, but moreover permits the characters to defy death. The Chorus of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus tell Oedipus specifically that his blindness is an alternative to death — though not the alternative that they would have chosen:

οὐκ οἶδ’ ὅπως σε φῶ βεβουλέσθαι καλῶς.
κρείσσον γὰρ ἦσας μηκέτ’ ὃν ἦ ζῶν τυφλός. (Soph. OT 1367-8)
I do not know how to tell you that you have been well-advised.
You would have been better not to live, than to be living and blind.
And although the blinded Polymestor at the end of Euripides’ *Hecuba* adopts the posture of an animal, crawling on all fours, a superhuman ability persists: he has evaded the death that Agamemnon decreed for him in an earlier scene (876).8

When disability functions as metaphor, via the procedures of narrative prosthesis, the disabled character is manoeuvred into a space where they are registered as both sub- and super-human, but in all cases non-human and ‘other’ to the assumed normate human audience. Ability remains the dominant ideology, positioning the abled character(s) as human and the disabled character as outside of human morality (as in the case of the disabled villain trope) and of death (as in the ‘supercripple’ trope). The presence of a disabled character in narratives that rely on this kind of telling metaphor (or narrative prosthesis) does nothing to unsettle ableist notions of bodily normativity. Instead, we find an imbalance: characters can have non-normate bodies in a variety of different ways, but their bodies’ capacity to conform to normate notions of ability is not equally dispersed among different kinds of non-normativity, as we shall see.

Disability is far from the only kind of bodily difference apparent in ancient literature. Heroes like Achilles (most famously) and Odysseus have bodies that do not conform to normate notions of human ability, but — in epic poetry, at least — heroes are marked out by their exceptionally capable bodies, as well as by the ability to manipulate their environment so as to ‘abilify’ themselves and to disable the bodies of others. Disability in ancient literature is a reflection of the operation of power on a body that is ideologically constituted by the disabling or enabling environment. Bodily difference becomes disabling when it enters into confrontation with a hostile environment, but in ancient literature the environment is rigged so as to enable the powerful and disable the powerless for narrative effect.

This is perhaps most clearly apparent in the Cyclops story in Book 9 of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Homer sets up the confrontation between Odysseus and the Cyclops as a mismatch of ability between two bodies. Odysseus is aware that he lacks the bodily ability to over-power the Cyclops: he notes that his initial plan to pierce Polyphemus in the belly with his sword will not secure his escape, because Odysseus and his men are not strong enough to remove the stone that blocks their exit (Hom. *Od*. 9.304–5), that is, to open the giant’s door. The environment is constructed for Cyclopean bodies rather than human bodies, but Homer does not allow the mismatch between the hero’s body and his environment to disable Odysseus for long. Instead, what epitomizes Odysseus’ heroism is his response to this mismatch between his emphatically human, mortal body and the hostile, superhuman environments he encounters on his journey: he is the hero with the power to engineer his body and his surroundings such that his body can perform beyond its ability, by means of cunning trickery. Odysseus’ successful escape is the result of his blinding and thus disabling of the

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8 That characters in Greek tragedy ‘overlive’ has been established by Emily Wilson, but Wilson does not discuss disability as an evasion of death that moves the disabled character outside of the category of ‘normate human’ (Wilson 2004).
Cyclops’ body, and of his adaptation of the environment so that his normate human ability no longer disables him within it. The story, told in Odysseus’ own words, positions Odysseus’ ability to overcome his environment as central to his heroism.

The idea that it is ‘heroic’ for a body to overcome an environment that disables it has a long and dangerous history, resulting in what Stella Young (2012) among others has termed ‘inspiration porn’. She defines ‘inspiration porn’ as follows:

An image of a person with a disability, often a kid, doing something completely ordinary – like playing, or talking, or running, or drawing a picture, or hitting a tennis ball – carrying a caption like ‘your excuse is invalid’ or ‘before you quit, try’. These modified images exceptionalise and objectify those of us they claim to represent. It’s no coincidence that these genuinely adorable disabled kids in these images are never named: it doesn’t matter what their names are, they’re just there as objects of inspiration. (Young 2012).

Narratives that attribute super-human abilities to disabled characters are primarily ableist tools used to objectify and dehumanize them — and to dehumanize disabled people, in real-life, too: Young’s points of reference here are not fictional. The super-crip trope places an individual expectation on the disabled person to ‘overcome’ their disability, and supersedes the necessary discussions about the ableist environments that disable them, as Eli Clare points out:

Supercrip stories never focus on the conditions that make it so difficult for people with Down’s [Syndrome] to have romantic partners, for blind people to have adventures, for disabled kids to play sports. I don’t mean medical conditions. I mean material, social, legal conditions. I mean lack of access, lack of employment, lack of education, lack of personal attendant services. I mean stereotypes and attitudes. I mean oppression. (Clare 1999: 2)

Within disability studies, supercrip narratives have been understood as closely related to staring, since both have their roots in the expression of wonder at the body of another person. But as Sami Schalk (2016) has noted, the supercrip trope does not operate as a single or monolithic narrative figuration. Building on the work of Amit Kama (2004) and José Alaniz (2008), Schalk distinguishes three sub-types of ‘supercrip’ within the trope: first, the ‘regular supercrip narrative’ (79), which presents a disabled person or character accomplishing a day-to-day task such as playing a sport, or raising a child, as if it were a heroic accomplishment (which is, Schalk finds, ‘premised on the ableist assumption that people with disabilities do not do these things’). Schalk identifies the second sub-type as the ‘glorified supercrip narrative’ (80), in which a disabled person achieves feats that a non-disabled person would rarely attempt, but effaces, in so doing, the other kinds of privilege (e.g. gender, class, race) that enable them to

9 Garland-Thomson (2002: 60–61).
10 See for instance Scott’s (2006) analysis of the effacing of various kinds of privilege in the supercrip narratives told about the American actor Christopher Reeve.
accomplish such feats. Schalk’s third category of the supercrip trope is expressed within the ‘superpowered supercrip narrative’ (81) in which an ability, specifically marked out as magical or superhuman, erases a character’s disability. All three of these types of ‘supercrip’ trope that Schalk identifies are found in narratives from the ancient world.

These tropes of bodily difference, along with the others examined above, inscribe disabled characters within a series of binaries, as St. Pierre and Peers put it:

We are dying or overcoming. We become a burden or an inspiration. We desire vindication or marriage. Our entire narrative worlds are defined by our Otherness, yet revolve around the normates and the normative. (St. Pierre and Peers 2016: 1).

These tropes (the disabled villain and the ‘supercripple’/inspiration porn) should concern the student of classical reception because they are not simply relics of a more formulaic narratological age, but remain at the heart of modern ableism both in terms of portrayals of disabled characters and assumptions about disabled people in real life. Classical reception studies is the process of investigating how the ‘traditional’ comes to be accepted as pre-existing, and it is vital that classical reception look to disability studies for the tools with which to lay bare how the apparatus of ableism comes, through the narrative prosthesis that is axiomatic in ancient literature, to seem traditional. Where disability studies has called for the ‘cripping’ of individual texts (much as gender studies in the early 1990s called for the ‘queering’ of texts), classical reception scholars must adopt this as an approach not only relevant to individual characters or texts, but to the ways in which Classics as a discipline contributes to the establishing of the ‘traditional’. It is not enough simply to remark on the ableism latent in the narrative structures of ancient myth and to say for instance that ancient narratives of heroism rely on an ableist ideology of ability as if ableism were simply an ancient problem: with the insights of disability studies research, activism, and scholarship, scholars working in classical reception studies can unpick the tropes that persist in present day assumptions about disability, and examine the impact of the construction of these ancient narratives as ‘traditional’.

Crippling the text

Sunaura Taylor explains the necessity of ‘cripping’ the text in the following terms:

The figurative use of a word such as ‘crippled’ reinforces the idea that crippled means broken, defective, and in need of fixing. Because the word is often used metaphorically, the actual lives of those who are crippled are simultaneously erased and stereotyped. ‘Crippled’ is a particularly interesting example because of how the word ‘crip’ (which comes from ‘cripple’) has been adopted by disability activists and scholars in a way that is similar to how LGBT activists and scholars have reclaimed the word ‘queer.’ Many disabled people identify as crips, and to crip something does not mean to break it but to radically and creatively invest it with disability history, politics, and pride while
simultaneously questioning paradigms of independence, normalcy, and medicalization. (Taylor 2017: 12)\(^\text{11}\)

To ‘crip’ an ancient text might produce a variety of different epistemological shifts in reading it, including the refusal to accept as traditional and neutral the tropes that contribute to ableist narratives, or meaning-making patterns that rely on narrative prosthesis. It is here perhaps that the greatest responsibility of the classical reception scholar lies. In an article on Hephaestus, Jay Dolmage issues the challenge to readers to take responsibility for the way that their own assumptions about disability construct meaning from the ancient texts in which Hephaestus appears:

If Hephaestus has so many stories, why should we believe that disability was silenced in ancient Greece? If Hephaestus was so respected and celebrated as a tradesman and an artist, why should we believe that craft and art, that rhetoric and expression, are exclusively the realm of the ‘able-bodied’? Hephaestus might become not just a model for ‘alternative’ versions of agency but also a model for the agency we might all have access to, once we are willing to consider reversing, moving sideways, facing traps . . . I want to suggest that the world we write (through our histories, our research, or in our classrooms) partially constructs disability. So we can see disability as deficit, or we can recognize potential. I argue for the latter. (Dolmage 2006: 135–6)

Dolmage calls for a critical assessment of the choices a reader faces in constructing the disability of a mythological character from a variety of different sources, and an awareness of the ways in which disability is coded as an insufficiency, problem, or lack by modern readers through their own interpretative choice, rather than required by the text.

\(^{11}\) See also McRuer (2018) on the relationship between ‘cripping’ and ‘queering’.

*Image of the Venus de Milo by Jorge Roynan. Licensed under Creative Commons ([https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en)).*
Although this awareness has come relatively late for classicists, the idea that ancient disability could be utilized to subvert rather than just to reinforce ableist assumptions about bodily difference has been readily apparent to disability activists for some time. *Venus On Wheels* (2000) is Gelya Frank’s ‘cultural biography’ of Diane DeVries, who Frank calls ‘a woman born with all the physical and mental equipment she would need to live in our society – except arms and legs’ (1). In it, Frank reads the Venus de Milo as a counter-narrative that actively subverts assumptions around physical impairment:

G: I got a weird image, letting my eyes flood with light. You got pale and looked like the Venus de Milo.
D: My mother’s friend one time gave her a candle of the Venus de Milo. And I came home and they lit it. I thought there was something symbolic there. That was terrible.
G: Did you identify with it?
D: Oh yeah! I was going with a black guy named Rico and I gave him a big statue of the Venus de Milo for his birthday. He loved it. His wife got mad and broke it over his head. He re-glued it. It was pretty, too.
G: She’s an image of you, really. She doesn’t have legs.
D: And also the one arm is shorter than the other. That’s what’s so weird, too. Also Diane is Greek. Or Roman. Diane is the other name for Venus.

As we talked, Diane and I discovered that we shared the feeling that the Venus de Milo did not seem to be missing limbs but was intended that way — and that she was beautiful in her own right. This experience permanently altered my perception of Diane as disabled. Her body need not be seen from the point of view of its deficits but as integrated and complete. That is how Diane herself seems to experience her body. (Frank 2000: 94–95)

In claiming the Venus de Milo as an analogue for her own body in this passage, DeVries subverts the culturally dominant assumption that disabled bodies exist in opposition to the normate bodies depicted in the kind of art usually termed ‘classical’. DeVries draws attention here to the fragmentariness of the Venus de Milo’s depiction of Venus (Venus is not usually described as disabled in ancient texts or other forms of mythography), but rather than fetishizing this fragmentariness and placing it in opposition with an imagined classical whole, DeVries treats the image of Venus conveyed within this statue as the whole classical referent. In doing so, she redefines the classical ‘norm’ and refuses the conflation of beauty with abledness, or with an idealized abled body that is so common in studies of ancient statuary.

But ‘cripping the text’ does not simply mean using classical characters with disabilities to reflect positive or neutral rather than negative ways of thinking about bodily difference — or refusing to approach the classical fragment with the gaze of a restorer imagining a classical whole. The refusal to accept the ableist ways in which ancient authors construct disabled characters, or the invitation to accept fragmentary depictions of ancient bodies as classical wholes in themselves, are important aspects
of the liberation work that disability studies does for the discipline of Classics — but its interaction with classical reception studies goes one step further. In her refusal to compare the body of the depicted Venus with an imagined ancient Venus whose body conforms to some kind of constructed classical norm, DeVries reminds classical reception scholars of their own role in the construction of those norms. Just as Dolmage argued with respect to Hephaestus that ‘the world we write ... partially constructs disability’, so too — as the reception scholar is so aware — does the world we read. Disability studies awakens classical reception to the fact that tropes of disability deemed ‘traditional’ do not arise in the absence of readers. It ‘situates’ the reader or receiver making them responsible for the establishing of ‘norms’ and, in Donna Haraway’s terms, ‘allow[ing] us to become answerable for what we learn how to see’ (Haraway 1988: 583).

The subjectivity of the reader-receiver is made apparent by the way in which disability studies asks questions about why certain tropes came to be made traditional, unpicking the operation of power in the classical as epistemological framework — or, as Haraway puts it, making clear that ‘rational knowledge is a power-sensitive conversation’ (Haraway 1988: 590). Edmund Richardson’s comment (in Shane Butler’s edited volume Deep Classics: Rethinking Classical Reception, 2016) bears witness to the way in which classical reception is beginning to find in the subjectivity of its reader figure a site for investigation:

In these collisions we can trace the radical subjectivity of reception: had you seen what I had witnessed (a ghostly hand, a glimpse of Homer, goings-on behind the curtain) you would hold a different opinion. (Richardson 2016: 235)

But whereas classical reception has (since Hans Robert Jauss (Jauss and Benzinger 1970) and Wolfgang Iser (Iser 1974)) always concerned itself with historicizing the precise subjective position of the reader with regard to the text, disability studies holds the reader ethically accountable for the way they choose to read a text. As Felix Budelmann and Johannes Haubold point out, the classical reception scholar should always question the formulation of tradition:

... awareness of the role of invention in forming traditions leads on to questions about the reasons for their invention. Here, as elsewhere, the question cui bono can prompt interesting answers. (Budelmann and Haubold 2011: 24).

In disability studies, the question cui bono has already been answered: pro bono of the ideology of ableism and of the abled reader, who has (sometimes consciously, and other times unconsciously) looked to classical reception to do the myth-making for their own supremacy, and presented this ableist supremacy as natural, traditional or

12 Feminism likewise, as Lively (2006: 55f.) points out, devotes attention to the operation of power in epistemological frameworks.
‘ancient’, rather than a living choice made by an empowered reader — who could have chosen to read differently.

**Crippling classics: a conclusion**

In this article, we have discussed the social model of disability; the ableism inherent in how disabled characters in ancient texts have been translated into English; and the harmful tropes on which much of myth-making and reading of ancient literature has relied. All of these dynamics might have been much more obvious to scholars working in classical reception studies, were the field not to have systematically excluded the perspectives of disabled people throughout its long history. This essay is not the first to remark that Classics has traditionally been formulated as an exclusionary discipline, but a particular set of barriers have been erected against disabled students and scholars in Classics. Its existence primarily as a field of higher education (and its relatively limited coverage in maintained sector schools and colleges) leads to the exclusion of the perspectives of disabled people because, as Dolmage explains in his recent monograph on ableist forces in higher education,

Disability has always been constructed as the inverse of higher education. Or, let me put it differently: higher education has needed to create a series of versions of ‘lower education’ to justify its work and to ground its exceptionalism, and the physical gates and steps trace a long history of exclusion . . . Further, the ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness. (Dolmage 2017: 3).

It is urgent that the pedagogy and research of Classics should work to include the perspectives of disabled people because, as Dalia Gebrial (2018) puts it,

the university is a site of knowledge production and most crucially consecration; it has the power to decide which histories, knowledges and intellectual contributions are considered valuable. (Gebrial 2018: 19)

Universities, in the words of Akwugo Emejulu (2017), regulate ‘what is legitimate to be known’, drawing boundaries around which particular kinds of knowledge-making are considered to be legitimate. But the problems of inclusion in Classics are not solely the result of the policing of modes of knowledge-making (resulting in the exclusion of diverse epistemologies) in higher education more generally; the discipline has done and continues to do plenty of policing all of its own.

Within the field of Classics as currently formulated, an ancient art historian may well point out in response to DeVries’ self-identification with the Venus de Milo that the statue displays material evidence of an earlier, ‘whole’ version — and a classicist may well point out that ‘Diane’ is not, in fact, the Roman name for Venus. But to call DeVries’ reading of the statue ‘incorrect’ would be to impose a hierarchy of readings that would be hugely detrimental to the field of classical reception studies, and would actively exclude diverse epistemologies from the conversation. It would be to forget
that — as we saw in the riddle of the Sphinx — embodied experience is a crucial form of knowledge-making. And the need to include alternative forms of knowledge-making is nowhere more apparent than in the field of classical reception, which establishes its legitimacy on the basis of ability: we ask whether Shakespeare was or was not able to read Greek in order to ascertain whether there can be a meaningful influence of Aeschylus on Hamlet. Whether its norms are physical (the beautiful — abled — goddess as a kind of aspirational form towards which the imperfect statue strives) or imagined (the perfect imagined Aeschylean drama that the imperfect Shakespeare imitates), much of the work that makes up classical reception is concerned with establishing to what extent the later work can emulate the constructed norm of the ancient artefact or text. Classical reception studies will not be truly inclusive until it finds a model that does not depend on ability or on an imagined ‘norm’ to formulate an understanding of connection and influence. The challenge of doing so is the challenge that disability studies poses.

It will take more than a Haraway-esque situating of the knower and reader to turn classical reception studies into a discipline that is inclusive. ‘Historically’, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder point out, ‘disabled people have been the objects of study but not the purveyors of the knowledge base of disability’: the problem of access is in part a question of generating epistemological models for the discipline that allow for types of knowledge not solely crafted by ‘abled’ specialists in exclusionary higher education departments (Mitchell and Snyder 2005: 198). We need to be talking about representation, about ‘cripping the curriculum’, and not allowing ourselves to imagine that higher education (and by extension Classics) is the realm of abled scholars alone. This will involve, in part, the critical theorizing of literary histories such that the ableist gaze at the ancient world is shown as the ‘normate’ and no longer accepted as the ‘normal’ position, and readers’ perspectives ‘situated’ (to use Haraway’s term), as well as a commitment to recognizing as legitimate knowledge that is generated through embodied experience. It will also, however, involve a much more tangible commitment to an inclusive pedagogy in the teaching of Classics and classical reception, and to inclusive language, material, pedagogies, epistemologies, and spaces for teaching the ancient world.

Classical reception needs disability studies, because it will make us better readers and receivers: the insights from disability studies alert us to the ways in which ableism conditions our readings of ancient texts, and grows outwards into modern society via such readings. In order for Classics to take on disability studies’ insights in a broader sense, those working in the field must make a commitment to inclusion within all aspects of our learning and teaching. Having now given the paper that resulted in this article at a number of different venues, we have experienced a number of different ways in which higher education environments — architecturally and socially — exclude disabled scholars and students. An intention to be inclusive, and a

13 See Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018: 69–73).
14 See Dolmage (2017).
commitment to inclusion through critically and theoretically engaged readings of ancient texts and their receptions alone will not be enough to transform the field such that it benefits from the processes of knowledge-making that are particular to disabled scholars. The riddle that Oedipus is able to solve relies on his embodied understanding that bodily experience comes in all manner of different forms. His solution does not go far enough in understanding that the bodily ‘norm’ is a social construction (even if he understands this better than the Thebans who come before him), because the riddle and his solution still insist on a normative chronology of disability in the human body.

But his solution asks us to think critically about the assumptions made about which bodies are constructed as ‘normal’ in ancient myths, and by whom. It is imperative that we take Oedipus up on his invitation to think critically about the narratives we are complicit in perpetuating about disability in the ancient world (and in its reception), and at the same time actively oppose the practical operation of ableism in our field and the spaces it occupies. Solving the riddle(s) inherent in the study of the ancient world will require the perspectives of students and scholars with all manner of different kinds of embodied experiences, and our discipline must seek to change both its epistemological and its practical operation such as to support and include the perspectives of those who have been and continue to be marginalized and excluded from it.

This commitment to access comes with a necessary ‘paradigm shift’ (75) in how we think about bodies, scholarly community, publication, and event organization (as Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018 writes of accessibility in activist communities). Our field needs reconsideration both in terms of its practices and resources of knowledge production, but also in terms of how it conceptualizes who gets to belong and contribute, and how, within the field. What if classicists engaged in access and inclusion, not as an afterthought, but as ‘a radical act of love’, in which ‘access is centralized at the beginning dream of every action or event’ (75), as a means to better, as well as more inclusive, readings of antiquity? We pose the question to students and scholars of classical reception: if ‘meaning is realized at the point of reception’ (Martindale 1993: 3), then what needs to be done in order to make those points of reception accessible to all? What will we do in our research, in our classrooms, and at academic events, in the way that we think about the ancient world and in the ways that we allow what we think about the ancient world to condition modernity, so as to create environments in which we might term ‘crip readings’ of antiquity flourish — and allow the field to flourish in turn? This ‘radical act of love’ is the challenge that disability studies poses to classical reception.

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