BODY IMAGE AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

Psychoanalytic, social, cultural and aesthetic perspectives

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PHYSICAL DISABILITY IN THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION

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Introduction

Hephaestus is one of the 12 Olympians, a divine smith, fire-god, and gifted artisan, greatly admired for his industry and creativity. He is the only god who works and is always employed on some task of great importance for one or other of the Greek deities. In contrast to the other immortals who are distinguished by their physical beauty, Hephaestus is crippled and is considered ugly even by his own mother. The stories that are associated with Hephaestus are among the earliest writings in the Western poetic tradition related to physical disability.

A review of the historical archive reveals that he is a complex figure with many features associated with other disabled characters. His image is not limited to a single work of literature; it is ubiquitous and spans the Western imagination from the ancient Greeks to the present day. One can find early versions of some of the cultural stereotypes that are commonly associated with people with disabilities. Previously Ebenstein (2006) argued that there are differences between his portrayal in Greek literature and later representations based upon Christian, psychoanalytic and Marxist interpretations of the pagan myth.

The meaning of ancient myths may change depending on the historical context, reflecting differences in the values and practices of successive generations, but they may also resonate with their original expressions. Through a process of amplification using an array of cultural artifacts one can document creative interpretations of the Hephaestus myth. Differing versions reflect changing social attitudes and religious beliefs, shifting political and economic realities, new philosophies and psychological theories, technological advances and evolving human experiences. Although disability is a deeply felt personal experience it is also a changing social and historical phenomenon. One’s individual experience of disability is embedded within this cultural tradition. Hephaestus holds an especially prominent place in the pantheon of
the great personifications of disability. As a complex figure he cannot be reduced to his disability, nor can he be separated from it. Imaginative variations of the myth appear in literature, poetry, art, film, philosophy, theology, psychology and other disciplines. Creative innovations from different times and places co-exist in the collective imagination where they can be compared and contrasted with each other. In the amplification process one can study the way the Hephaestus myth has been interpreted across the ages from various ideological perspectives. The survival of a pagan god with a disability throughout the centuries provides an opportunity to chronicle the cultural history of disability. One can also continue this tradition by re-imagining the Hephaestus myth in the context of the emerging field of Disability Studies, which defines disability as a ‘social construction.’ It is important that Disability Studies appropriates the most iconic images of disability from the historical record. At the same time, viewing Hephaestus through a Disability Studies perspective articulates the ongoing relevance of the ancient myth within contemporary society.

A fable of rejection, resilience, resourcefulness and recovery

The classical writers are unanimous in stating that Hephaestus is thrown down from Mount Olympus. In some versions, his fall causes his limp, in others it is his disability that causes his fall. Hera is envious of the solo creation of Athene by Zeus and wants to give birth to a glorious son who can rival the bright-eyed goddess. However, Hephaestus, conceived through parthenogenesis, is born with a shrivelled foot. In shame and disgust Hera casts the infant out of Olympus so that he falls into the great sea. The rejected child is rescued by Thetis, mother of Achilles. For 9 years he remains concealed in her subterranean caverns, a secret vocational workshop, where he learns his craft. During this second incubation and apprenticeship he forges jewellery and other fine objects but also plots his return to Olympus. In other stories Hephaestus is the son of both Zeus and Hera and the situation is a marital quarrel. The young Hephaestus speaks up for his mother, and Zeus, enraged at his interference, takes him by the leg and throws him through the portals of Olympus. All day long he tumbles through space and, at sunset, falls more dead than alive on the island of Lemnos, where the barbaric-tongued Sintians find him. These versions, in which he is thrown down by either his mother or his father, and in which his disability is either congenital or caused by parental abuse, were combined throughout the centuries.

A creative mistranslation established a connection between the Greek myth, an image in the New Testament, and bitterness. According to Panofsky (1972) some scholars translated ‘there he was brought up by Sintii’ or ‘ illicit nutritus ab Sintii’ as ‘ illicit nutritus absintii’ which means ‘ there he was brought up on wormwood.’ Wormwood is a bitter herb, the chief flavouring ingredient in absinthe. The mistranslation references the shooting star in the Book of Revelation that falls from the sky and renders the water bitter. Through the devilish connection with wormwood, Hephaestus was linked with bitterness and his limping gait became a symbol of the pollution of the soul:
Freud's writing on disability builds upon and reinforces the association with bitterness and evil. He uses Shakespeare's Richard III as the model for his analysis of personality problems of people with disabilities. Freud emphasises the bitterness with which Richard depicts his deformity to bolster the argument that virtually all people with disabilities have personality problems. Their neurotic rebelliousness is linked to their feelings of the great injustice that has been visited upon them. In Richard's case, he justifies his ruthless and immoral behavior by his grievance of being, through no fault of his own, ugly, unloved and unlovable. As noted by O'Brien (2001) many studies published in the medical and psychiatric literature reinforced Freud's conclusions by citing common personality problems of disabled people including their hostility, bitterness, and vindictiveness. Thus Freud transforms a personification of the demonic cripple into a sick one by introducing a psychiatric medical model perspective.

An alternative explanation is that in the Hephaestus case study bitterness, feelings of injustice and thoughts of revenge originate in a traumatic childhood event. However, it is not his disability but the unfair treatment at the hands of his abusive and abandoning parents that inspires the bitter outcast to re-claim his rightful place in the world. In the end, his revenge is accomplished in such a clever way that it is therapeutic for the entire Olympian community.

In one story Hephaestus sends sandals as gifts to all the gods, but those he sends to his mother are made of immovable and unyielding adamantine. When she tries to walk she falls flat on her face. In this slapstick farce Hera is caught in an undignified position and publicly humiliated. At the same time Hephaestus makes fun of himself, and his own deformity. There is another famous story known as the 'binding of Hera.' In revenge for his expulsion from Olympus, Hephaestus sends a beautifully wrought golden throne to his mother as a gift. Hera sits on it with delight, but when she tries to rise again she is gripped by golden mesh fetters. The throne then rises into the air and Hera finds herself levitated as if in a magician's trick. The Olympians take council as to how they might free their queen but only Hephaestus knows the secret of the loosening. They send the divine smith a message that he should return to Olympus and set his mother free, but he replies adamantly that he has no mother. Ares, his braggart brother and sexual rival, vows to bring Hephaestus back by force, but the God of War returns to Olympus in ignominious defeat. Instead, the stubborn Hephaestus is coaxed back by Dionysius who gets him drunk. In farcical fashion the intoxicated smith is led back to Olympus atop a donkey. The carnival atmosphere of the donkey processional is part of a Dionysian shift that liberates Hephaestus from a fixation on revenge. However, the dramatic return also disrupts and transforms the social hierarchy and collective psychology of the heretofore insular Olympian community. Hephaestus is not so drunk that he would free Hera without exacting a price. He demands marriage to Aphrodite, the Goddess of Beauty.

From a Disability Studies perspective the story depicts a community that must adjust to someone who has been stigmatised, segregated, and discriminated against. The glorious fable of rejection, resilience, resourcefulness and recovery presages
the striving for social justice through protest demonstrations, and the legal and legislative victories of the self-advocacy movement that have culminated in the uneasy inclusion of people with disabilities within the broader society. In Hephaestus we find a character who is motivated by his anger to confront a world that has discarded him. He stages a non-violent act of civil disobedience that completely shuts down Olympus. It is the disabled character himself who creates the humorous situation as an effective tool to confront his oppression and challenge the existing order. His stubborn-anger does not lead to acceptance, adjustment or passivity. On the contrary it lifts him up to reclaim his dignity and civil rights.

The embrace of sex, violence and disability

Despite his disability and less-than-classical good looks, Hephaestus has the confidence and audacity to demand Aphrodite, the most beautiful of the goddesses, as his wife. We have a glimpse into their marital bedchamber in a scene from The Aeneid. Venus worries about her son Aeneas and begs her husband to forge magnificent armor for him. In the marriage bed she trades her sexual favours for weapons of war. Vulcan rises early the next morning and commands his assistants, the Cyclopes, to begin work on the armaments requested by his wife.

There is an often told story of Aphrodite's infidelity with Ares. Helios, the Sun, spies them in the act of lovemaking and informs Hephaestus who determines to catch the two in their illicit sexual activity. He hangs an invisible net over his bedposts and pretends to depart for his workshop. As soon as he leaves, Ares steals into the house and embraces Aphrodite. The net drops down upon them. Meanwhile Hephaestus retraces his steps and calls out to the other gods to witness his errant wife and her lover caught in a compromising position. Hephaestus blames her adulterous affair on his lameness. According to Edwards (2004) lameness is a characteristic associated with ugliness, an 'ungraceful unevenness,' and a 'cosmetic defect' that contrasts with the Greek ideals of physical beauty and symmetry of the body. In Greek mythology Hephaestus's limp has an aesthetic meaning. After being rejected by his mother he is now betrayed by his wife because he is hideous and deformed.

In this comic burlesque and public shaming Hephaestus plays the role of the insulted husband. Uncontrollable laughter erupts among the gods as they gaze upon the bawdy sight. For Ares it is a humiliation too while Hephaestus wins praise for his ingenuity. Hephaestus claims that his trophy wife has cheated on him because he is ugly and disabled. As in the story of the binding of Hera hurt feelings are tempered by laughter. Although his masculinity is compromised Hephaestus does not exhibit weakness or passivity and refuses the role of the violent jealous husband. In freeing the lovers he chooses a peaceful settlement but only after Poseidon guarantees to pay the 'price of adultery' on behalf of Ares.

Lowenthal (1995) studied various interpretations of the story in literature, painting, the graphic arts and sculpture. Some versions focus on tragic betrayal and wounded pride while others including many Christian commentators emphasise a
moralistic message. Still others offer more practical or humorous advice. A fourteenth-century monk observed that the marriage was doomed from the start because ‘when ugly husbands are mismatched with beautiful wives, adultery is sure to follow.’ Janson (1952) describes a mock-heroic version of the story from the Renaissance. Vulcan, rather than Venus, is carrying on an illicit love affair. She is furious and dispatches Mercury to the island of Lemnos to stop it. Mercury finds the island populated by apes and Vulcan in love with the most beautiful simian maiden. According to Panofsky (1972) several post-classical scholars translated ‘there he was brought up by Sintii’ or ‘illic nutritus ab Sintiiis’ as ‘illic nutritus ab simiis’ or ‘there he was brought up by apes.’ This playful translation provides an unexpected context that informs the reading of the myth. The association with apes reinforces the idea of parody and ‘aping’ that is connected with Hephaestus’s comic persona. It is also a form of derision because apes were considered ugly imitations of human beings in the same way that Hephaestus was considered a deformity of the Olympian ideal of physical beauty.

In a modern context literary critics Hinz and Teunissen (1985) refer to the Ares–Aphrodite–Hephaestus Complex that pervades the D.H. Lawrence novel, Lady Chatterley’s Lover. They see the crippled god embodied in war veteran Clifford Chatterley, the unsympathetic wheelchair-bound husband. However, in this fictional twist it is the beautiful, healthy, young wife who is victimised, frustrated both sexually and emotionally, because she is tied to an impotent invalid with a crippled soul. Trapped in a loveless marriage, she takes a lover. This theme, referred to by disabilities scholar Louis Battye (1966) as the Chatterley Syndrome, builds upon the idea that once a person becomes crippled he is no longer a man. In ceasing to be a sexual being Clifford is essentially defrauding his wife.

Psychoanalytic interpretations have emphasised the themes of sexual inadequacy and deviance. According to Slater (1968) this story of adultery is an ‘exercise in self-humiliation’ and ‘self-emasculating.’ Stein (1973) suggests that the failure of his marriage to Aphrodite is related to his ‘Mother complex.’ His crippled feet give ‘an obvious clue’ to ‘problematic sexuality.’ A psycho-sexual interpretation of the Hephaestus myth that focuses on castration or incest motifs places the blame for Aphrodite’s infidelity on the disabled victim. However in the story promiscuous Aphrodite remains true to her own archetype. She is not associated with marital fidelity. Indeed, she inspired and actively aided the adultery between Paris and Helen that led to the Trojan War.

In the amplification process Chatterley can be contrasted with another wounded veteran depicted in the 1978 film Coming Home. The story is a love triangle between a beautiful young woman named Sally, her gung-ho Marine husband, and Luke, a disabled Vietnam vet. The film revolves around the adulterous relationship between Sally and Luke and depicts a man with disabilities as attractive and sexually active. It also turns a wounded warrior into an outspoken critic of a war that he participated in. In so doing Luke reclaims his masculine honour and sexual identity. He is transformed from a tragic victim, an angry, bitter paraplegic institutionalised in a VA hospital, into an anti-war activist, friend and lover.
In civil society an alarming increase in disabilities resulting from gun-related domestic, street and gang violence has become a public health concern. Psychologist James Hillman (2005) refers to the ready access to guns in the context of the Hephaestus myth:

today you may pick up a fearful beauty that holds Ares, Aphrodite, and Hephaestus all together in a fine piece of metalwork at your local gun dealer. Like the steel net that entrapped the lovers, the weapon is another Hephaestian instrument holding beauty and violence in permanent embrace.... Human beings love their weapons, crafting them with the skills of Hephaestus and the beauty of Aphrodite for the purposes of Ares.

(Hillman 2005: 124–125)

A significant segment of the American population is caught up in a frightening love affair with guns, an almost fetish-like desire to buy, collect, display and brandish firearms. In Greek mythology the most beautiful goddesses ask the armuror Hephaestus to fashion weapons either for themselves or their favourite warriors. At the same time the mythic gunsmith is known as a peacemaker who prefers to use laughter rather than weapons to settle disputes. In the story of adultery the illicit liaison between the beautiful Aphrodite and the violent Ares is put on public display and rejected by the Olympians. The comic resolution of the story is not the binding but the unbinding of Ares and Aphrodite, which forces them apart, and frees the broader community from their dangerous, forbidden embrace.

Reclaiming the historic link between disability and work

Although Hephaestus is accepted back to Olympus, it is as a second class citizen, divine servant and labourer. As the only god who works, his true home remains his workshop. He is also the most physically vivid of all the Olympians, frequently depicted as a robust smith, middle-aged, with a bearded face, a powerful thick neck and heavily muscled arms. The ‘Forge of Vulcan’ is a popular subject in art history with various depictions by painters such as Breugel, Rubens, Velázquez, van Dyck and others. In these personifications Hephaestus looms large and distinguished. He can be identified by his anvil and forge, wielding a hammer and tongs, working with metals, and crafting wondrous objects such as the sublime Shield of Achilles.

His poetic workshop is specifically designed to accommodate his disability. Of particular interest to the field of Disability Studies is his work in the area of assistive technology, accommodations in the workplace, and his creation of mechanical objects that function as automata. He built self-animated tripods with golden wheels that move back and forth at the gods’ assemblies and which perform the work of robot servants. He also utilises voice-activated bellows. Hephaestus’s powerful torso is balanced precariously on his weak legs. In order to steady his unsure steps he fashions beautiful crutches, two golden statues that resemble living girls. They hasten to his side and assist him as he walks. Thus, his crutches are
transformed from emblems of weakness and dependency to ones of power and independence. These golden maidservants could not only speak and use their limbs but were also endowed with intelligence. His creations include other machines that imitate the behaviour of living beings such as Talos the giant bionic bronze man who had Olympian blood in his veins. For travels away from his volcanic workshop, Hephaestus is depicted riding in a magnificent winged wheelchair-like chariot. However, the underground forge, located in the bowels of Mother Earth, is his true home. Here he is surrounded by a crew of oddly shaped assistants including giant one-eyed Cyclopes, dwarf miners, and ancient smiths who are also personifications of tools.

In some versions of the myth, Hera gave birth to Hephaestus from her thigh in an effort to compete with Zeus’ solo birthing of Athene from his head. In other versions it is Hephaestus who assists in Athene’s birth by splitting Zeus’ head with an axe. In either case these two deities, brother and sister have been paired from the beginning. In the Homeric Hymn they are depicted as the founders of civilisation who taught men practical arts. In this vision of homo faber and the rise of humanity through technology, the lame god is cast as a culture hero. Yet, Homer’s Hephaestus stands in stark contrast with his portrayal by many Christian poets and scholars who made a connection between the fire-god who is thrown down from Olympus and another fallen angel. The association of Hephaestus and Lucifer is explicit in Milton’s Paradise Lost where he is numbered among Satan’s attendants.

Different images of technology emerge from different visions of the origins of civilisation. In the Homeric Hymn early human beings are depicted as living in caves like wild beasts before using fire, inventing tools, and learning practical skills. Compare this with the Christian image of the garden, an unsullied pastoral landscape defiled by the noisy engines and polluted waters associated with technology and industrial progress. In the latter context Hephaestus’s trickiness becomes a sign of a malevolent nature; his limping gait becomes a symbol of a crooked soul; the ‘sweat of his brow’ is a reminder of his fall from grace.

The popularity of the story of Hephaestus’s return to Olympus in the sixth century B.C. marked the emergence of a new kind of city-state in Athens and a rise in the status of the city’s artisans. The inclusion of the working class into the aristocracy of the Olympian order signaled a new leadership that incorporated the forces of social progress personified by culture-hero gods like Hephaestus. In the eighteenth century technological developments in Britain including iron manufacturing, improvements in machine tools, and the widespread use of coal resulted in a new world order. Fourmier D’Albe (1925) explicitly associated the advent of the Industrial Revolution with Hephaestus’ return to power as the god of the Machine Age. As a noble craftsman and working class hero his ‘arm and hammer’ became a ubiquitous symbol for organised labour.

The technological innovations associated with industrial society led to changes in the organisation of production. Hephaestus’s artisan workshop evolved into the modern factory which required a new breed of worker, subject to rationalisation and control. It required human beings to function mechanically as virtual automata.
At the same time, as noted by L. Marx (1967), many social commentators became disgusted by the ugliness, pollution and human suffering associated with the new factory system. Rather than being connected with progress and the rise of civilisation as portrayed in the Homeric Hymn, industrialisation and machine technology were viewed by some as the evil antithesis of the quiet pastoral garden. This narrative of the Hephaestus myth incorporates the exploitation of the working class, and hellish working conditions resulting in disabilities caused by industrial accidents. Unlike craft workers, industrial workers were subject to the conformity of the assembly line and their bodies became interchangeable parts of a machine. Employment policies excluded people with disabilities from working in standardised environments designed for the average worker. This widespread practice was endorsed even by labour unions that were focused on securing disability benefits for workers who were injured on the job rather than integrating injured workers and other people with disabilities into the workplace.

The lesson of the ancient myth is that people with disabilities can thrive and excel in the workplace. Hephaestus's workshop served as an icon for the Athenian craft guilds. Even today the incorporation of this vision into actual work environments could enhance opportunities for quality jobs and meaningful employment for people with and without disabilities. His shop provides a mythic model for a futuristic workplace that applies universal design elements, and incorporates technology and individualised accommodations to tap the productive energies of all workers. Here the creative soul of the worker is valued and technology and artistic design are used to accommodate individual differences.

Conclusion

An essential aspect of the Disability Studies philosophy is its definition of disability as a 'social construction.' The social construction of the disabled body has deep roots in the collective imagination, and Hephaestus plays a prominent role in this history. The Disability Studies discipline can appropriate this tradition by re-interpreting the myth through its more contemporary perspective. Through the centuries, the Greek ideal that equated symmetry of the body with beauty, the Christian tradition that often linked a limping gait with a crooked soul, the psychoanalytic approach that transformed a demonic cripple into a sick one, have dominated the discourse, reinforced each other, and created a construct that defined the disabled body as ugly, evil and ill. Disability Studies can offer a counter-narrative, one that looks at the very same stories and finds new meanings.

The Hephaestus myth is part of a long tradition in Western literature of using disability for comic purposes. His practical jokes give rise to 'inextinguishable laughter,' among his fellow Olympians. Brown (1998) identifies Hephaestus as a 'trickster.' In spite of the 'friendly-cruel' laughter that may be directed at him he remains a powerful and magical figure. It is he who conceives and executes clever pranks to achieve a specific purpose. His genius is based upon an ability to mimic others, but also to parody his own disability. He is able to embarrass others because
he is willing to be embarrassed himself. Since anyone may be a target of mockery, Hephaestus, the disabled trickster, creates a comedy of equality in which everyone in the Olympian leisure class has an equal right to be ridiculed and humiliated. Through the comic genre Hephaestus’ conflicts with his mother, brother and wife are resolved in a peaceful manner.

For literary critic and Disability Studies scholar Leonard Kriegel, Hephaestus represents a living inspiration that resonates with his own experience of disability. In his essay, *Bodily Passions: Hephaestus among the Gods*, he describes his profound identification with the mythic character.

And so I watch the lame god push his body through the heavens of Olympus, and my own cripple’s heart fills with envy of and admiration for this brother in the kingdom of the crippled, my shining example of the will to endure.

(Kriegel 1998: 76)

Hephaestus’ ‘will to endure’ despite his physical limitations reminds Kriegel of his own grudging anger and resentment and sees in the disabled deity a defiant hero. Hephaestus is an example of what Kriegel terms a ‘survivor cripple,’ a tough-minded, courageous hero, at once disabled and enabled, an active conscious agent who refuses to play the role of the victim or outcast and is able to impose his presence on the world.

Through a Disability Studies interpretation of the ancient myth, the crippled god may be viewed as an icon of a strength-based approach to physical disability. He displays courage, confidence and practical intelligence along with humility and good humour. Part of his independence derives from his assistive technology which includes a winged wheelchair, voice activated machinery, intelligent robots and other clever devices that support him in navigating the physical environment, the world of work and the social hierarchy. By critically reviewing the evolution of socially constructed representations of disability such as Hephaestus, Disability Studies can open up a broader discussion of the place of disability in our own popular culture.

References


