

Book Reviews

Hippocratic Corpus is matched by evident familiarity with the full tragic canon and by impressive command of an extensive bibliography.

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Martha L Rose, *The staff of Oedipus: transforming disability in ancient Greece*, Corporealities: Discourses of Disability, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2003, pp. xiii, 154, illus., £26.00, US\$42.50 (paperback 0-472-11339).

Martha Rose presents a well-researched study of physical disability in ancient Greece. Not only does the book further our awareness of issues related to the body and its care, but it also helps to dispel misunderstood perceptions of disability in the past. It is often assumed the Greeks had strict definitions of disability that were used to separate people into distinct groups. This misconception is used today to validate attitudes and understandings towards those classified as disabled, and it is this naïve application of medical history to modern disability studies that is the main issue of Rose's book. The principal argument against making direct analogies between the two periods is that disability is a cultural construct determined by the inherent beliefs of a particular society. On the basis of cultural and temporal variation, Rose confidently asserts that modern conceptions of ancient disability are based on false premises that should not be employed to comprehend disability today.

The book's focus is limited to physical impairments because teratology and mental illness, for example, were more distinctly classified than physical variations. Although people were known to have physical disabilities, the terms used to describe them were often nebulous such as "lame", "incomplete" or "imperfect". Furthermore, there is little mention in the Greek medical literature of physical variations, suggesting it was society, not the doctor, that determined whether a person was

disabled. If a person with a physical limitation was able to support him or herself or had someone to care for them they remained integrated in their community and were not medically classified as being different.

The book has five main chapters, each with a comparative discussion of ancient and modern perspectives of the topics considered. Chapter one is used to examine the evidence for disability in classical texts and the tenuous nature of disability classification in ancient Greece. The evidence demonstrates that people of varied body types were fully integrated into Greek society, which is in opposition to a society consisting of people with ideally proportioned bodies, as Victorian scholarship would have us believe. In chapter two, Rose argues against the common misunderstanding that infants regarded as disabled were exposed at birth for being a potential burden to their family and community. Reasons against the presumption of exposure are that many congenital defects are not apparent at birth, and with reference to the first chapter many had survived childhood with physical differences.

More specifically defined disabilities—speech impairments, deafness and blindness—are the focus of the next three chapters. Speech impairments were discussed in both historical and medical texts, but understood to be a problem related to the tongue. It is noted by Rose that modern support networks for people with speech impediments do not account for these interpretations of speech difficulties. Rather they uncritically use people in the past, such as Demosthenes, as heroic symbols, who overcame speaking difficulties in spite of the fact these individuals were not noted as being important by their contemporaries for overcoming such problems.

Deafness and blindness are discussed to demonstrate that disability was dependent on context rather than physical limitations. Deafness, for example, was considered an impairment of reasoning and a sign of inferior intelligence, which were grounds for excluding people from political life. It is suggested that agricultural workers did not suffer social ostracism because there was no need to

communicate in the manner of a politician. Similarly, with blindness, different conditions suggest that each person with visual impairments had to adapt to their own particular situation in Greek society.

The common perceptions of seclusion of disability in ancient Greece are here broken down, demonstrating there was no dichotomy of ability and disability, but a range of conditions defined by the society. Thus, the past should not be used to justify and explain present opinions of a modern disabled lifestyle.

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Véronique Dasen (ed.) in collaboration with **I Villeveygoux** and **S Ducaté-Paarmann**, *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité. Actes du colloque de Fribourg 28 novembre—1^{er} décembre 2001*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis vol. 203, Fribourg, Academic Press, and Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004, pp. 417, illus., SFr 120.00 (hardback: Academic Press, 3-7278-1453-5; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 3-525-53060-9).

This remarkably coherent collection of papers dealing with birth and early childhood in Antiquity is notable for the range of topics covered, from Egypt and Early Babylonia down to medieval Byzantium. If the four papers on the Ancient Near East appear less rich than those on Greece and Rome, the result of the relative paucity of documentation, they nevertheless offer useful points of comparison with the more familiar Greek evidence. But what is most striking is the variety of approaches here displayed, from the archaeological and palaeopathological evidence for stillbirths and infant burials through to the interpretation of legends of divine conceptions and births in art as well as in literature. The role of birth and young children in religious ritual is considered alongside its obverse, the religious rituals surrounding birth.

Many familiar topics are touched on, but almost always with fresh approaches. Soranus' gynaecology is discussed both as an example of the transmission of texts and ideas, and against a background of practical treatment (dealing with a transverse presentation, or when, and how, to perform an embryotomy, for instance). Embryotomy is here exemplified from archaeological finds, as well as literary texts, and its ubiquity contrasts with the legendary stories about Caesarean section. The relationship of this learned medicine to "folk remedies", amulets and birth charms is neatly brought out in a number of papers. The editor's own contribution presents a fascinating series of small statues that open to reveal a foetus in the womb. The social history of childbirth also finds a place, with discussions of the Roman laws dealing with very young children, and the role of mothers and wet nurses in the suckling of the new-born. The advent of Christianity, and its own ideology of childbirth, can be shown to have brought changes in the provision of such nursing care.

Two other features are particularly welcome. There is a very detailed index of names and topics, with piquant juxtapositions—Orbana (a native Italian deity of childbirth), orgasm, Oribasius and Origen—something not always found in the reports of conference proceedings. Even more valuable, for specialists and non-specialists alike, is a very long, selective bibliography of recent books and articles dealing with birth and early childhood. This will be an extremely valuable resource, for many of its references cannot easily be found in standard bibliographies either of the history of medicine or of classics.

This is an excellent volume that deserves to be the first port of call for anyone interested in childbirth in the ancient world, and we look forward to the publication of the proceedings of other conferences in the same series.

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